

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Teenage Girls and Female Television Presenters: An ethnographic study of girls on representations of women in television**

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# **Teenage Girls and Female Television Presenters:**

An ethnographic study of girls on representations of women in television

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the way in which teenage girls form relationships with female television presenters and how they incorporate these images into their everyday living. Furthermore, it investigates the ways in which girls are able to use collective discussion to articulate their understanding of images of women within television texts.

Drawing on my ethnographic research with a group of female teenage peers, I suggest that girls use conversations about female television presenters as a way of communicating with their peers, exploring ideas of femininity and scoping out the female landscape in preparation for their own adult lives. I argue that these female presenters are representational and are used as cautionary tales and not as aspirational role models. The focus group members demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about and cognisant with the ways in which and how the media addresses women. This contradicts commonly held assumptions about teenage girls as susceptible and easily manipulated by media images, and it also reveals a complex gendered interaction with media texts. The ‘friendships’ formed with female television presenters are a way of negotiating these girls’ teenage years, and they offer an opportunity to create a roadmap for their futures, express their anxieties and reflect nostalgically on the passing of their girlhood. Through focus group sessions, and adapting Wood’s (2009) text-in-action method, I found that my transcripts of the focus group discussions could be broken down into themes. The most commonly occurring set of terms, which appear also to anchor contemporary feminist research, are choice, empowerment, sexualisation, equality, liberation and individualism. The transcripts can also be characterised through the terms ‘disparagement’, ‘affectionate disparagement’ and ‘knowingness’. This research will discuss the ways in which such terms account for young girls’ negotiation of images of women on television. I have discovered that it is easy to underestimate the ability of young girls – they are

constantly conflicted by the media images they experience and their own sense of identity, and they work hard at negotiating through this conflict.

## Acknowledgements

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# **Ethnography and Method Questions**

## **Chapter 1**

This research, which has a long tail in terms of impetus and experience, focuses on teenage girls and their consumption of media images. I began collating background information in 2001, when I started my career as a part-time lecturer in a further education college. I completed the more formal ethnographic research more recently as a full-time lecturer, and I am still involved in observing and collecting the experiences and observing the language and conversations of teenage girls in further education.

The following description provides some background to the research presented herein and illustrates what inspired me to develop my research and carry out an ethnographic study with six girls. The college where I have based my research is located in an affluent area of Surrey. To provide some background to the area, the average house price in the town is around £600,000 (average UK house price, £162,462<sup>1</sup>). The town has a Conservative District Council, a Conservative County Council and a Conservative MP, and its European Council representation is made up of four Conservative MPs, two Liberal Democrats, two UKIP MPs, one Green Party MP and one Labour Party MP. This is one of the wealthiest areas in the southeast of the UK and is largely conservative in its outlook. The town has a private estate, gated around its perimeters and guarded by security personnel manning the entrance and exits. It is widely recognised as one of the more affluent locations in the UK. Very few of the staff or students who attend the institution in which my research was carried out actually live in the town, so they commute from the surrounding area. This is largely due to the restrictive house prices and the average salaries of college lecturers and similar level professions. The student demographic varies, from students from comfortable middle-class homes in local surrounding areas to those from local areas of deprivation, as well as

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<sup>1</sup>Land Registry index available at <http://www.landregistry.gov.uk/public/house-prices-and-sales/search-the-index> accessed January 2013.

students who live in Greater London. A recent Ofsted<sup>2</sup> report describes the catchment area as having ‘significant numbers of young people and adults locally with low educational attainment’, whereas ‘[t]he local educational environment is particularly competitive, with many sixth forms in state schools and with significant private sector provision’. Very few of the students attending this college have had experience of a private education – students from the private sector do not tend to choose this local college for their further education, preferring instead one of the many sixth form colleges or independent schools in the surrounding area. A general further education (GFE) college usually attracts those students on a vocational career path, ranging across engineering, public services, hair and beauty and the creative industries. The college student demographic in terms of social class is varied, and of these a relatively small percentage in comparison to inner city institutions receives the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)<sup>3</sup>, an indicator that is often used as a measure of family income and social background. The majority of students are white British (Ofsted 2011/12 identified that 18% of students were from ethnic communities), which is just above the percentage resident in the most immediate local communities.

A cursory (and by no means robust) calculation suggests that since 2001, I have taught and been in the company of approximately 300-350 teenage girls over my time at this college.<sup>4</sup> This figure can be extrapolated out to cover approximately 15,600 hours’ contact time with students aged between 16 and 19 (4.5 hours per week per course). I have taught students on Media and Film courses (Vocational Level 3 and A-level) and I have also taught them in a personal tutor capacity. Being a personal tutor involves spending time with students as a whole class and in a one-to-one discussion once a week. The kinds of conversations involved in this role range from attendance issues, personal home problems, lack of

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<sup>2</sup> OFSTED 2011/2012 available at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/130825> accessed January 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Educational Maintenance Allowance <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5370>

<sup>4</sup> This figure is based on calculating 6.5 complete two-year vocational courses amongst three groups where girls make up approximately 25 per cent of the population. Also, 12.5 Advanced Level two-year courses, amongst 2.5 groups where girls represent approximately 50 per cent of the population.

motivation and relationship problems with both friends and boyfriends/girlfriends. Usually, any issue regarded as serious and harmful is referred on to the safeguarding team. This may include drug use, signs of depression or some form of abuse, for example. So, effectively, my role is to identify any noticeable problems and/or listen to students' problems. I am also charged with liaising with parents. Taking this role alongside my teaching responsibilities means that I am very familiar with a wide variety of students in all areas of their life. Nonetheless, I may be less familiar with the personal circumstances of others if they are not part of my tutor group or have never been identified as in need of support. I would like to offer this experience as part of my research findings and will discuss the methodological implications of this type of ethnographic research.

I can compare my experience of this ethnographic component of my work with studies such as Angela McRobbie's (1978) five-month investigation of young girls in a youth club, in which she was interested in the lived experiences of these girls. Her study involved questionnaires, observation, interviews and informal discussion. Additionally, ethnographers such as Marie Gillespie (1989) and Bev Skeggs (1997) have developed their research through long-term investment in their subjects. Gillespie's study 'evolved over seven years of teaching in two Southall high schools' (Gillespie 1989, in Gray 2003, p.64), while Skeggs describes the varied ways in which ethnographic research is carried out and suggests that its range and flexibility represent one of the strengths of the methodology:

Compare the differences between Jackie Stacey's (1994) *Star Gazing*, which uses letters and questionnaires... Kath Melia's (1987) *Learning and Working*, which is an analysis of the occupational socialisation of nurses conducted through forty one-hour interviews and which defines itself as "within the scope of ethnography," Amanda Coffey's (1999) account in *The Ethnographic Self* of her participation in accountancy culture... my ethnography *Formations of Class and Gender* (Skeggs, 1997) based on three years living and participating in the culture of a group of working class women with periods of follow up participation (over an 11-year period) which drew on a wide variety of sources of supplementary contextual and biographical information. The definition as ethnographic is based not just on the methods used, but the questions asked and how they are analysed (Skeggs, 2001, p. 427).

In the work underpinning this thesis, the ethnographic dimension is premised both on conversations that took place in focus groups I convened and my broader experience of engagement with my subjects as students in college. The focus of my research is on teenage girls and their relationship with media images of women.

I have found that I have been in discussions with girls, aged 16-19, from a variety of backgrounds. The backgrounds and home life of these students are sometimes apparent to me through conversation, sometimes through tutoring. In my experience, the range of issues affecting a girl's progress at the college is wide and varied. For example, some girls have found it difficult to attend college every day due to financial hardship, in that their parent/guardian may not have the funds on any given morning to give them their travel fare. Other students have to deal with their mother/father/sibling/step-parent or guardian's alcohol/drug/mental health problem and are constantly aware of the possibility they may need to leave college early to "sort out" a situation. Some students are dropped off and picked up by their family every day, while others are given cars as soon as they pass their driving test and some remain dependent on public transport for the duration of their course. The family profile is often varied and complex. Some live with one or both of their parents and others split their time between both parents, which can result in the student living in two different towns simultaneously. Some students complain of bitter relationships between themselves and their stepfather or stepmother, and this can result in the student "choosing" to live elsewhere. Some have decided to live with neither of their natural parents and either live with friends, an older sibling (who on one occasion adopted his sister) or occasionally with their ex-step-parent, whom they prefer to their natural parents. A small number of students are also carers for parents in the absence of a formal carer in the home. This arrangement also means that the carer allowance is kept within the family and adds to the weekly budget. A few students are temporarily homeless through family arguments and spend their time on the sofas of their friends' parents' houses (and on one occasion slept in unlocked – and therefore available – garages until the argument was

resolved). These are a number of examples from myriad possibilities, and as a personal tutor I have become familiar with almost every arrangement.

These descriptions of home life are not necessarily related to social class. In my experience, home life problems are equally likely to occur within any social class, although working-class families tend to focus on financial issues as the main source of conflict. However, the question of social class and where these students position themselves has become increasingly difficult to identify. Those affluent students with cars, who do not have a part-time job and are able to go on regular holidays, are clearly identifiable as comfortably middle class. Similarly, those from financially deprived backgrounds were previously visible because of the now defunct Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) system, as the college was able to track the attendance of EMA students by asking them to get their EMA card signed at the end of a class – a potentially embarrassing experience, as the students would have to queue up to have their card signed. A significant number of students appear to come from single parent households and are therefore potentially financially vulnerable. However, in some but not all cases, the maintenance paid by the absent father (it is an absent father in the majority of cases) is significant and causes no real financial deprivation; in fact, some of these students talk about being able to play their parents off against each other and reap the financial rewards of this strategy. The majority of students have part-time jobs, and some work more than 12 hours per week, as they need the income. This description of the student demographic is likely to be typical of most further education colleges in the southeast of England and appears to match the experience of lecturers in other colleges. I am the UCU Branch Chair at my college and liaise with other institutions in the southeast; consequently, I can confirm that this description is typical from my conversations from UCU members and the data they provide at area committee meetings.

Students usually enter the college at 16 (although some attend from 14 on some vocational courses) – an age when they are inclined to challenge rules. Their attendance at the college is voluntary and this is their first experience of a relaxed timetable and a more adult code of conduct. There is usually some testing of boundaries both in college and in the home. The student demographic is on the whole neither predominantly affluent nor significantly deprived, so the students are probably a good example of the average teenage experience, albeit one that is grounded in a predominantly white British community. Whilst the demographic is not of my making, it is of interest to me to examine the “average” or “ordinary” teenage girl, as much research has focused on specifically deprived and unheard voices. The girls who became the focus of my research were not from marginalised groups and they were not the silent unheard minority – they were usually loud and expressive and, in some cases, socially able and financially comfortable. It was against this backdrop that my research questions began to formulate.

My intellectual curiosity about these students was awakened almost immediately once I began working with them. Prior to working in education, I had worked in the corporate media industry as a producer and production manager, and I had minimal contact with teenagers. In addition, I had not been in an FE environment since I was an A-level student some years previously. I had recently completed a PGCE and was enthusiastic about teaching and also quite determined to make sure that girls were confident with the technology involved in media. My career in the corporate world began in the late 1980s and I continued to work as a producer until 2005. I had endured many male-centred meetings early in my career as a production assistant and later also as a producer which had been, in my experience, a male-dominated environment – directors, producers, editors, camera operators and graphic designers were predominantly male. The clients, usually managing directors of large blue chip companies, were also male. I wanted to inspire young girls to achieve not only creatively but also technically, as I had understood that, to succeed in the media, you have to be

able to “talk technical” and keep abreast of new innovations. Almost immediately, I noticed that the girls on the vocational media course did not engage with the technical aspects of production. The male students, however, were very involved in camerawork and editing, and I considered that this was due possibly to the fact that only male lecturers taught technical subjects. At the time, I became the only female lecturer amongst a male media team who taught technical media subjects such as filming and editing. I considered the possibility that the girls had not been engaged by the subject because they were not being addressed in a language with which they were comfortable or familiar. What the girls were doing instead was choosing to be researchers, production assistants (because they were “good at paperwork”) and set designers on the many projects they were set, and none of these activities involved engaging with technology. The popular items of clothing at this time were low-cut jeans, the visible thong and T-shirts with slogans professing the wearer to be a “Porn Star.” This was indicative of the ways in which girls were being addressed and were perhaps identifying their own selves. It appears to me that it is simpler to identify with familiar objects and traits of femininity (fashion production paperwork where organisation skills are foregrounded, respectively) than to try to succeed in unfamiliar territory (such as camerawork and editing). In fact, many of the girls took pride in their ability to complete production paperwork effectively and neatly! The boys, on the other hand, were relieved not to be bothered with the tedious task of pre-production planning, as they mostly wanted to get creative with the camera kit. I have been involved in countless discussions where the female in the group had been assigned by the male team leader the administrative tasks because they were “good at it” and the female in question would agree and tell me that that is what they preferred doing anyway. The solution to this unequal distribution of roles was to introduce single-gender groups, which was effective to some extent but not ideal for a vocational course where the premise is to reflect industry practice, in which case a separatist approach would be difficult to maintain.

Over the years, technology has changed quite dramatically, and today a large proportion of the course is computer-based multimedia production. Students need to be familiar with, for example, Photoshop, InDesign, Flash Animation and Final Cut Pro editing, and I have observed that these are non-gendered skills. Most students become familiar with software programs at school and come to the course equally confident, having been given equal opportunity and access to these skills. However, in my experience, girls still complete pre-production paperwork more effectively and still tend to choose magazine design over filming and editing. In the film industry, a successful female director is rare, and despite my attempts to showcase such women positively, girls do not tend to choose this career option. In introductory conversations I have carried out with any new media group, the boys want to be directors, editors, cameramen, graphics designers or game designers, and a few of them are unsure. The girls are often less specific, suggesting that their interest is in “maybe something” in magazines, media production, events management or advertising. In recent classroom conversations with three groups on three separate occasions (42 students, 70% male and 30% female), only one girl said she wanted to be a film director. This suggests that although there is more equal opportunity and access, the practice of film technology is still predominantly masculine. It also suggests that girls are drawn to production more than they are to directing and editing. Acknowledging these attitudes from male and female perspectives gave me food for thought and I began to consider how girls have been informed throughout their lives and how they appear to be confident, enthusiastic 16-year-olds with competent multimedia skills and yet cannot be engaged by male-dominated professions. If they do not aspire to be film directors, camera operators and all the other professions described herein, then why not and what has influenced this decision, especially as they are, after all, enrolled on a media production course. Film directing involves a very visible demonstration of a person’s creativity and confidence whilst magazine design is much more anonymous, and this may be the key determinant for young girls who, in my experience, are often very focused on body images – their own and also those seen in media images



of women. They use these images as markers of success for women, as women in magazines are quite often judged on their ability to maintain a “perfect” body. The girls consequently may be less convinced that they can be successfully visible and accountable in any other context. To use film directing as an example, this involves leading a technical production team and using one’s own personal creative vision to drive the film. The final result is a consequence of the director’s ability, drive and determination to maintain their creative vision. If the film is negatively received, the onus is on the director. In my experience, this kind of jeopardy is not usually attractive to young girls, whereas any creative contribution to a magazine production, for example, is a collective effort where individuals are named but the output comes from a number of contributors – a factor which may be more appealing to girls and may bear some significance on the way many teenage girls are engaged by images of female presenters, as the skills these women display are emotional rather than technical. For example, female presenters are usually expected to have conversations with guests, using interviewing techniques to gauge their guests’ mood, compliance toward the show’s intention and to make the guest feel conciliatory toward the show. These are nurturing skills, and a female presenter’s knowledge of camerawork and other technical skills are untested and therefore presumed absent.

After working with young people for a couple of years, I began to formalise my research practice by embarking on a study of teenage girls and television presenters for my Masters programme. I completed this study as a distance learner, so I was still working and teaching within the proximity of teenage girls, who I had observed talked frequently about female presenters. *Big Brother* (Endemol, Channel 4 2000-2010), presented by Davina McCall, was in its third series and I noticed how the girls would discuss her as if she was one of their friends. *heat* magazine (Emap) had a collaborative relationship with *Big Brother*, and news from the show dictated much of the magazine’s content. The girls at my college were avid readers of *heat* and were able to extend their conversations about McCall and other female presenters through this medium. During their

conversations they would speculate about the life of a presenter, using McCall as their catalyst. They appeared to have some ideas about how desirable her life would be and seemed to be articulating both a desire to be a television presenter and an innate acknowledgement that they never could achieve this end. There was a struggle between what appeared possible, namely a female presenter heading a prestigious primetime show such as *Big Brother* and how they saw themselves: ‘not pretty enough’ or ‘not the right kind of person’. What they liked about McCall and other female presenters was their ordinariness and authenticity; they believed that these presenters were addressing them directly, because they made reference to these women as if they were their friends. Unlike female celebrities such as pop stars, musicians and actors, television presenters often appear to share the same experiences as their viewers, have relationships that girls can relate to and are constantly addressing the ordinary in their own lives. Both the formal and informal observations and discussions I had with my female students around such themes formed the basis of my decision to study how teenage girls engage with images of women on television, specifically television presenters, who appeared to play an interesting role in the lives of young girls. I was intellectually curious about how much these images were part of their lived experiences, and I was also interested in how and whether the relationships they formed with these women somehow informed their choices in life, such as those about their media career, and how these relationships informed their own subjectivity. These women are visible in the media because of their appearance; they are not usually the creative drivers of a television show. As the hosts, they oversee the smooth running of the programme and reflect the spotlight onto the subjects of the show, and in this way their role is similar to that of the traditional domestic roles of a housewife and domestic hostess and is particularly feminine in its characteristics. Typically a housewife will facilitate the running of the household, and this work is often undervalued both by the housewife herself, as the description is often preceded by the word “only,” and by the cultural value attributed to it by the media and society. The domestic input by a housewife is therefore invaluable but unrecognised and not

categorised as “labour,” as it is unpaid and the nature of the work is idealised as feminine as it deals specifically with cleaning, cooking and nurturing. A female presenter is therefore similar inasmuch as the role is nurturing towards the show and the guests and the presenters are visible and contribute to the success of the show; however, the creative vision and the show’s development are often driven by production management.

Using female presenters as the central focus appeared to me to be a way to articulate my perspectives on the experiences of teenage girls. It is also an area that is under-represented in research within cultural studies, as the focus has been on bigger, more obviously influential phenomena such as reality programming or fandom. The girls involved in my focus group discussed female presenters not in the context of fandom but of friendship and the ordinary. However, finding television presenters appealing, and also being influenced by the lifestyles of these presenters, may be in some way connected to the ways that girls create ideas about themselves. It may also be a way that they feel that they can succeed in the media industry without being technically skilled, and I recognised that the women speak to them in ways that they understand. What also became of interest is the way in which these presenters are able to engage young girls and at the same time enable them to articulate ideas of the limits of possibility. By this I mean the way that girls often talk about their lives and ambitions in a negative and hesitant way. Some girls expressed ideas about wanting to be a television presenter but also immediately qualified this with the acknowledgement that they never would be able to do so, because they were not the right kind of female, ‘not pretty enough’ and ‘not the right kind of person’. This initially suggests to me that the girls did not feel that they were ‘qualified’ for the role of a confident female and that they had ambivalent ideas about femininity and their own subjectivity. I was very interested in why the girls were drawn to these women yet felt that they themselves could never become television presenters but were nevertheless engaged by their ordinariness and by the ways in which these women

connected with their own lives. The contradictions that are expressed herein, I suggest, are indicators of the complexities and ambiguities present in the ways that girls engage with images of women in the media. In my experience it is a commonly voiced assumption amongst many young girls that they probably will not succeed in their ambitions. Whether this is a true reflection of what they really feel is not clear. To be self-effacing is regarded as an admirable trait in women and much more approved of than over-confidence, which is often treated with suspicion. Therefore, these girls may articulate their desires and yet remain hesitant to be overly confident in case this is seen as self-regarding.

For my Masters research, I distributed questionnaires and then carried out three one-hour focus group sessions with three groups of girls, with four in each group and one session per group. There were in total 12 girls and three hours of discussion, and all the participants were drawn from the college's Art and Design, Music and Media courses. The findings from this research work left me with a sense of needing to find out more. I had come a little way in examining the relationships the girls formed with each other and with the television presenters, and some of the findings suggested that the girls were very engaged by the female presenters, as they were often very animated when discussing them both positively and negatively. I was aware that for some reason these women were discussed regularly by teenage girls and in some way these discussions were important to their friendships and for the way in which they constructed their own subjectivities. I was able to reflect on what they had said, although the conversations were quite limited. I had not been able to carry out an in-depth study because of the dissertation parameters and my inexperience in focus group work, so as a result I felt that I needed to carry out a longer and more focused study. This realisation led logically to becoming a research student on a PhD course of study.

I was able to recruit a small group of six girls to agree to take part in a cohort study over one academic year, with three focus group sessions punctuating the year. After distributing two sets of questionnaires across my own college and two other schools (via my step-daughters and my son), I was able to identify a small group of students who were willing to continue with the research. I had initially hoped to be able to recruit another focus group as well as the one within my own college and department. My full-time lecturing post and my very limited resources meant that it was difficult for me to reach girls from other schools, where I would have found it very difficult to maintain a year-long relationship and where I would not have established relationships on which to draw. The girls who agreed to take part were from my own department, and I had to consider the research implications of this situation because of the existing teacher/student relationship and the effect this would have on the sessions and our work outside them. It was easier to secure cooperation from this group because they knew me, which is relevant and has both positive and negative implications from a research methodological perspective. I had initially envisaged that the six girls who agreed to take part in this research would be part of a pilot study. When I had transcribed the first group session, however, I realised that the material they had generated was extremely rich and plentiful. After some contemplation, I decided that I would be able to develop and sustain a working relationship with this group that would enable the sessions to develop fruitfully. Therefore, I made the decision to treat the group sessions as more than just a pilot study, and they came to form the substance of the fieldwork underpinning this thesis.

Ethnographic methodology strikes me as the most useful and productive route for this type of research, as it emphasises experience and it has been a fruitful method for cultural studies and in particular feminist research. I have provided here a context for my supporting evidence about the attitudes that teenage girls portray towards female television presenters. This evidence is based on both my experience as a further education lecturer and the initial research carried out for my

Master's degree. In order to validate my experiences, submit the context of my research as evidence and justify my methodology, I began by examining some existing ideas about research methods for cultural studies, as will be described below. I assessed the epistemological and ontological considerations for ethnographic methods and herein make a case for the reliability and significance of my own research methods and findings. The following is a description of ethnography as a methodology for cultural studies. This is the discipline that my work most comfortably sits within, as cultural studies have used ethnography as a reflexive research tool, thus creating opportunities to re-evaluate the term "ethnographic."

## **Ethnography and cultural studies**

Christine Geraghty (1998, p.141) sets out a comprehensive appraisal of the role of the ethnographer and recognises that the work undertaken in cultural studies has moved away from the notion that the researcher works **on** the audience and instead suggests that the researcher works now **with** the audience. Theories are not so much tested as developed over a period of time, which has certainly been the case during my own research, as the conversations I have had with girls have shaped the direction and focus of my methodology.

Geraghty sees a problem in defining the term "ethnographic" (1998, p.141), as it can be open to interpretation and therefore criticism if the methodology is not defined clearly. She refers to Marie Gillespie's work, an ethnographic study of young people in Scotland, as an example of how ethnography can be interpreted. Gillespie claims to use a 'fully ethnographic method', and she defends her method and suggests that unlike the interview-based approach of other researchers, 'ethnography is the empirical description and analysis of cultures based on intensive and extensive fieldwork in a selected local setting' (1998, p.142). Geraghty notes that this is clearly a much tighter definition than that of other theorists within cultural studies. Whilst there do not appear to be any

real or set boundaries for the ethnographic method, Anne Gray, when reflecting on her research into the use of video in the home, preferred to use the term ‘ethnographic intentions’ (1992 cited in Geraghty and Lusted, 1998). Gray, whose audience research considers how the video recorder/player is used in everyday family life, gathered female interviewees on the basis of their relation to their viewing habits. She commented that her strategy was to:

encourage open discussion and allow women themselves to introduce topics which are of importance to them. By keeping the discussion open they can take pleasure in having their opportunity to explore and express their own ideas and feelings in these matters (Gray, 1992, cited in Baehr and Dyer 1987, p. 52).

I can empathise to some extent with Gray’s cautious claim to ethnography, as my focus group sessions could be criticised for their lack of range and because of my potential lack of emotional “distance” from the group, as a lecturer. Initially, this made me hesitant to confirm my approach as ethnographic. I can nevertheless identify with Gray’s notion of ‘ethnographic intentions’, and I had used a similar strategy to encourage open discussion within the focus group.

Geraghty addresses the issue of a rigorous methodology, by using Henry Jenkins’ introduction to his book on television fans as an example of how ethnography and fandom collide. Jenkins notes, ‘I write both as an academic... and as a fan’ (in Geraghty, 1998, p.142). This comment introduces the idea that fandom and ethnographic enquiry can work together. Although Jenkins’s work has a different emphasis to Gillespie’s ethnographic method described earlier, Geraghty suggests that many different approaches are possible for television studies, and in this respect she refers to Ien Ang’s claim that ‘ethnography is not just a research method’ but ‘a discursive practice *par excellence* that foregrounds the diverse, the particular and the unpredictable in everyday life’ (Ang, 1991, cited in Geraghty, 1998, p.142). Clearly therefore the ethnographic method is open to interpretation, and although it has a loose definition, for cultural studies it is regarded as a valuable and inclusive method of investigation.

Equally resonant for my research is Joke Hermes' (2009) fascinating cooperation with communities and the way in which she questions the relevance of traditional audience studies in the light of Web 2.0. Hermes sets out a detailed argument for re-evaluating the role of the researcher/ethnographer. Here, she refers to methods where the audience's responses to texts are theorised by the researcher in relation to organisations, broadcasters, governments, etc., which she describes as "Media Studies 1.0." Within cultural and television studies, the researcher-participant relationship traditionally has the potential to create unequal power relationships and therefore, she suggests, has limitations in terms of critical enquiry. Hermes, who maintains that the majority of ethnographic fieldwork is not a method that she now feels has been used to any meaningful standard, posits a highly controversial and relevant question:

... audience research has only ever been in the business of explaining audiences to interested parties that rarely included audience members themselves. After all, who reads our work? To whom do we sell research and reports? (Hermes, 2009, p.111).

Whilst Hermes does not underestimate the significance of work undertaken by Janice Radway (1984), David Morley (1980) and Ien Ang (1985), she nevertheless suggests that these works focus on questions of identity by using a specific text or genre and where the relationship between viewer and text is localised. This appears to exclude recent reconfigurations of audience relationships with texts: 'The insight that such links are not direct but part of discursive webs of meaning reaching far outside the individual media text seems to have been lost' (Hermes, 2009, p.112).

For Hermes, in the world of Web 2.0, if researchers are to survive they should be 'temporary co-travellers' working within communities, by which she means the ways in which researchers should work to co-create research projects with communities and not use them as research subjects. I am very intrigued by this call to work within communities and welcome the way that Hermes has revised the relationships between researcher and audiences into a more democratic and dynamic experience. Inspired by Hermes, I did in some way become a "co-traveller" with the cohort and



research group in this project, as I was working within their proximity and was able to remain connected to them in a number of ways. Willis (1980 in Gray, 2003, p.83) comments that 'just being around' and 'feeling the pulse' is an important part of the research process. In my case, my presence in the college and the department kept me connected to the conversations of teenage girls.

## **Experience**

Gray's (2003) instructive and comprehensive description of research practice for cultural studies presents an argument on how to employ experience as a tool for research. Gray's work provides examples of research from prominent voices within cultural studies as exemplars of ways in which questions of ethics, validity, ontology and subjectivity are examined, so that any researcher can confidently ask themselves: how do we know what we know? My research is based on using my own experience as a lecturer and the formal and informal ways that this affords me a means of accessing information about girls. I use their reflections, conversations and observations and extrapolate a number of ideas that are then generalised to offer a wider understanding of this cohort. I also use my focus group conversations with six girls over a number of months as evidence of my cumulative findings. I anticipate that the harshest criticism of my research pathway will be that I am offering a common-sense analysis and suggesting ideological assessments, but without any real evidence that my claims are valid. The questions I need to consider are about theorising experience – both mine and that of the teenage girls I encountered – and also how I am offering this experience up as epistemology. Is it possible to legitimise the knowledge that I have accumulated through involvement with the college and bring this knowledge into focus to create meaning and make an interpretation of the lived experiences of teenage girls? According to Gray, these are exactly the questions that cultural study raises.

Cultural studies has become notorious for, among other things, its neglect of the considerations of method and methodology (e.g. Tudor, 1999) and, in some ways this book is an attempt to respond to this flaw. However, in looking at the often innovative research methods which have been adopted by scholars, I regard this methodological eclecticism to be a strength within the field and evidence of the energy and dynamic nature of much of which we describe as cultural studies. It is a malleable and ever changing field (Gray, 2003, p. 5).

It is clear then that defining an ethnographic method is not easy, which is both a strength and a weakness of this methodology. The strength lies in the way that an ethnographic approach can be used to access information about the subjects, while definitions of ethnography vary across disciplines and in particular for cultural studies. This could also be the cause of weakness in the method, as it is the diversity of approaches implicit in the methodology that also attracts criticism.

When I began this research it was because of my experiences and observations of young people in education. I had formulated an assessment of girls as young people responding to the world in which they live in ways that are coloured by media images and media texts. Their experiences as teenagers are pressured by external expectations to which they respond by developing strategies that incorporate external media influences in a variety of ways. I am attempting to offer an assessment of their experiences through focus group transcripts and my own observations. The challenge that faces researchers employing a methodology that values personal experience is epistemological. What credentials do researchers have to suggest that they can decide what the experiences of their subjects actually mean? To use Skeggs' notion of experience and subjectivity, she suggests that subjects are created through experience and that ethnomethodology as a method is able to account for ways in which the experiences are the instigators of subjectivities:

This enables the shift to be made from experience as a foundation for knowledge to experience as a production of a knowing subject in which their identities are continually in production rather than being occupied and fixed (Skeggs, 1997, p.28).

This imperative, to uncover influences and examine the lived experience of a specific group of people, is typical of ethnographic research for cultural studies. Gray (2003, p. 20) also notes that the practice of

ethnography, ‘making sense of the world through observation, picking up clues based on social and cultural competence, through relating to others via conversations and discussion’, is fraught with epistemological weaknesses. The resulting description of a lived culture from the perspective of an ethnographer opens up questions about truth and validity and how can we know what we think we know about other people’s lives. However, this weakness can also be regarded as a strength – it is the ability to reassess lived experiences without the limitations of empirical methods that presents opportunities to consider alternatives to discovering meaning in the ways in which people live. Ethnography can move research methods into areas where more possibilities about the truth can be examined. Using methods such as observation and conversation involves the appreciation of cultural competence and shared knowledge as a community and then reflecting on this knowledge to create some assumptions about lived experience. Gray makes reference to the notion of reflexivity and the researcher and suggests that it is the ability to be reflexive that can broaden out the investigation and research findings to include how meaning is produced by the research group:

As researchers, we can never capture the “whole truth” of any aspect of the social and cultural, rather we can, from our specific vantage point, produce a version of the truth, but one which we present modestly for others to consider (Gray, 2003, p.21).

Gray suggests that a dynamic and reflexive approach throughout the research allows a project to grow and become ‘genuinely exploratory’ (2003. p.22). She also suggests a range of dialogues into which the researcher enters, namely with the subjects of the research, different theoretical perspectives, colleagues in open discussion and also in writing up the work. Each stage serves to work and explore the ideas and findings and also to provide opportunities to reflect on epistemological questions such as the validity of one’s findings and the effectiveness of the theories used to measure these findings. I have found that the parameters of my own ethnography have grown as the research has developed, and I have sought ways of moving forward, ways of interpreting the research findings and ways of measuring these findings against existing feminist theories about girlhood. I was not initially able to locate the validity of my

informal observations and conversations, or my accumulated knowledge as a lecturer and personal tutor, within the parameters of ethnography. However, I did find Probyn's assessment of the problems found in ethnographic methods of interest:

... it is hardly surprising that there has been, of late, a great deal of interest in ethnography's "problems"... certain problematics seem to appear more pressing from its perspective, questions about the (im)possibility of representing others; the increasingly unstable construction of the white male as expert; the eclipse of science as a ruling metanarrative. In short, questions about where one can speak from, to whom one speaks, and why one speaks at all seem to be immediately articulated within ethnography than elsewhere (1993, in Gray, 2003, p.23).

In support of a flexible approach to methodology, Gray draws on John Fiske (1996) and his claims that audiences are empowered and resistant in their engagement with and responses to popular culture. She suggests that it is the 'unpredictability of the ways in which people use popular culture and that our theories and analytical models should retain the equivalent flexibility' (Gray, 2003, p. 47).

In agreement with this approach, my own methodology has evolved and developed from experience, observations, formal and informal discussions and focus group sessions. The stimulus material for the group sessions was based on the group members' choices of television presenters. I was able to create assessment criteria for the focus group transcripts after the final session and by assessing the way in which the transcripts could be themed. In this way my research has remained open and flexible, with the expectation that any unpredictability in terms of the focus and direction of the conversations could be incorporated and assessed. An example of this is the decision to include Katie Price in my research. I had not considered Price as a television presenter, yet the questionnaires that were returned named her as one of the choices – her reality television show playing at the time meant that the cohort identified her in this way. The subsequent discussions about Price proved rich and fruitful in terms of articulating ideas about equality, empowerment and the ways in which teenage girls can rationalise how women use their bodies to exercise control. Had

I simply provided a list of presenters for the respondents to choose from, I would have missed this opportunity.

It appears then that the problems of method are constantly critically reassessed for effectiveness and the kinds of research material these methods produce. DeVault (1999, p. 205) observes that it is both important to ‘notice and cultivate personal’ sources for research projects and also to notice the limitations of this method and include other perspectives in your assessment of your own research method. In addition, and particularly relevant for my work, DeVault raises some pertinent questions for the researcher about defining a research project as “feminist.” In particular, there is a useful discussion about who has the right to declare their project as feminist:

... I would urge researchers asking this kind of question to consider more nuanced and “strategic” issues of labelling. Why does one want to call one’s project “feminist”? How would that label advance this particular project? How would it contribute to feminist discourse? How might calling it feminist create problems for the researcher? Could it create problems for feminists? I also advise that the problem – both at these early stages and later, in the presentation findings – is not simply to label a project feminist or not, but to discuss in detail how it is related to feminist research (DeVault, 1999, p. 206).

I have identified my reasoning and impetus behind beginning this research project, by citing the way in which young girls are addressed and my own experience as a female in the media industry. Given that these are the parameters of the project, do I wish to identify this as a feminist project? The research is informed by feminist ideas inasmuch as I am aware of the way in which girls respond differently to males on a media course, which in turn fits with feminist ideas of inequality or difference between genders. I am also aware that girls and not boys are interested in and engaged by images of women in the media, specifically female television presenters. Does naming this work “feminist” therefore advance my research? Furthermore, is it important to place it within an academic body of work that uses feminism as its departure point? Essentially, I think this is a feminist project, as it examines existing feminist notions of girlhood, maps existing feminist research, attempts to make connections with my own research findings, describes and utilises a

feminist investment in equality and empowerment and advocates social action. I take into account the recent debates around post-feminist ideology whereby young women are identified as being estranged from any feminist language and thought. Charlotte Brunsdon (2013), in a recent keynote speech, makes reference to the ‘periodisation of post-feminism’, suggesting that feminist ideas are much more disconnected and difficult to categorise. Brunsdon suggests that young women do not identify themselves as feminist, commenting that ‘sometimes gender is the least thing they have in common’.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2013) recently suggested that girls have distanced themselves from ideas around feminism and are inventing feminism ‘on their own terms’.<sup>6</sup> I will return to these ideas throughout this work, as Brunsdon and Rowe Karlyn acknowledge a crucial aspect of the feminist and post-feminist journey, and the idea that young women identify themselves in a much more differentiated way, and using Brunsdon’s suggestion that they do not use gender as a unifying structure, is of great interest. Given this turn within feminist studies I find that using a feminist framework as a research methodology is still relevant, because examining what feminism constitutes and means for young women today can only help to articulate the extent to which a feminist perspective is relevant for their lives and subjectivities. I recognise that this argument becomes a little circular inasmuch as young women do not necessarily respond to feminist frameworks; however, it is useful to attempt to identify why this is the case, and it is also important to be able to keep in mind past and present examples of feminism and how these ideological forms have the potential to inform a future feminism, before we choose to abandon any connection between them at all.

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<sup>5</sup> These remarks were made by Charlotte Brunsdon in her keynote address in conversation with Christine Geraghty at the Television for Women Conference, held at the University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Rowe Karyln made these remarks in her keynote address at the Television for Women Conference, held at the University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

To this end, I have found it imperative that I use contemporary feminist writing on girlhood as a common framework against which to measure the focus group responses. I also use this framework to identify a set of themes through which to organise the focus group transcripts. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4 and identify how this research connects specifically with contemporary feminist writing. Also, and perhaps most importantly, I have found that feminist research epistemology more readily accepts ways in which experience and knowledge are investigated.

Ramazanoğlu and Holland describe succinctly the problem inherent in this approach:

However strongly it is felt, there is no guarantee that one woman's experience will be comprehensible to another, or that any one human being can ever fully understand themselves or others. Given these difficulties, it can seem reasonable to value personal experience, but to write off experience as a critical connection between knowledge and reality, and so give up trying to ground feminist knowledge in women's experiences. In practice, however, feminist researchers have tended to be reluctant to take this step. The political expediency of having to choose between conflicting knowledge of gendered lives means that accounts of experience make a difference to what is known, and can change what counts as knowledge. Experiences, and how these feel, remain central to understanding similarities and diversity in gendered lives, and to investigation of inequalities, injustices and institutionalized power (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002, p.123).

Validating the experiences of teenage girls, by positioning my ethnography within a feminist framework, appears to be the most advantageous and complementary route for my research.

Feminist social researchers continue to examine the strengths and challenges of methods of data collection and suggest that this is an epistemological choice. It was my decision to use longitudinal observations, conversations and informal discussion over a number of years and then to concentrate on one group to continue these conversations and observations and hold three focus group sessions. I chose to use focus groups because this method of data collection was the least invasive and was a way of continuing the informal data gathering of teenage girls' relationships with media images. Wilkinson describes the advantages of this method:

Focus group researchers, then, are virtually unanimous that, compared with many other methods of data collection (especially the one-to-one interview), focus groups reduce the researchers influence.... But, whether it identified as a problem or a benefit, researchers concur on the relative lack of power held by the focus group researcher (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 281).

The author goes on to observe that the focus group method allows participants to speak in their own language and in their own terms. My intention, before I began the group sessions, was to create a very loose structure, participate as little as possible in the actual conversations and remain open to how long the sessions would run. In this way the girls were involved in the running of the sessions – they decided which days they were free, the room in which they would meet and for how long the sessions ran, as I continued recording until the group was no longer interested in discussing the subject. They had previously identified ten presenters they wanted to include in their discussion, and I had found footage of these presenters for them to use as visual stimulants for discussion. I gave the group a number of options as to the location of any session. They chose rooms within the department, albeit on a random basis, with the only proviso on my part being that there was a place to show video clips. I provided drinks, cakes and biscuits, and in this way the sessions felt different from their usual taught lessons. One of the girls would set up the microphone and recording equipment and also the DVD player/data projector. To this end, I am confident that I made every attempt to relinquish control of the sessions as much as possible, that the group was in charge of the duration of the clips and that the participants felt free to comment in a relaxed environment. I note the fact that each girl was happy to return for the next session as evidence of their genuine interest. I was comfortable in giving up any power I might have been perceived to hold, so as to reduce the influence of the role of the researcher. My method attempts to reduce the artificiality and increase the naturalness of the conversation; the girls were in control of the conversation and the sessions ended when they had nothing more to say on the subject. I cannot envisage a more flexible method of finding out how girls respond to images of women on television or how they may interpret notions of empowerment, equality, the sexualisation of women and notions of choice for women and girls.



I understand that the focus group method is flawed inasmuch as it constructs a version of reality for a limited time amongst a fixed set of people about one particular subject. A criticism of this method is that the research becomes unmanageable, as the researcher relinquishes control. However, remaining mindful of Gray's call for researchers to become 'genuinely exploratory' (2003, p.22), allowing focus group members to be "liberated" from a structured and time-restricted session creates possibilities for the conversation to take unexpected turns. Examining the nature of the relationship between the researcher and their subject, Harding suggests that research methodologies need to be re-examined when incorporating the experiences of the research subject:

Once we undertake to use women's experience as a resource to generate scientific problems, hypotheses, and evidence, to design research for women, and to place the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject, traditional epistemological assumptions can no longer be made (1987, p. 181).

## **Criteria of validity**

The transcription and subsequent interpretation of the focus group sessions create their own problems. Is it possible to use criteria to assess whether the transcripts can identify how girls are engaging with female presenters? I make the claim that girls measure and check themselves against ideas of femininity through media images of women, thus contributing to their own subjectivity, and how images of female television presenters provide a roadmap of the obstacles that girls may encounter. I am naturally cautious about making claims on behalf of the focus group and then extrapolating from these claims to include teenage girls on a wider scale. I offer an account of a gendered response to media image, and mindful of this point I now turn to debates on validity, in order to examine my methodology:

Feminists may not be able to lay down neutral or universal criteria for divining what is "better" in all cultures and value systems, but they can urge (on both political and epistemological grounds) that all criteria of validity should not be abandoned just because none can be universal. Rather than be inhibited by the inevitable contingency of truth claims, readers of feminist texts can identify how knowledge claims are framed in theory, how they are connected to experience, and also ask what makes some claims stronger, more general or more plausible than others. This means researchers specifying (at least as far as possible) what

criteria are being used and why, and how local or general these criteria are (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, p. 137).

The authors suggest that researchers should be transparent about the circumstances and context of their research and complement the commonly held frameworks of their research community. This suggests that knowledge of and claims to certain ideas are relative and dependent on the 'epistemic community'. My research sits within feminist research on girlhood and ethnographic research on lived communities. To examine the transcripts and the conversations and observations of teenage girls I have created a set of criteria, using contemporary feminist work as a benchmark. The set of themes are: choice, empowerment, sexualisation, equality, liberation and individualism. These were identified as the common framework amongst contemporary academic writers on girls and girlhood, using authors such as: Kat Banyard (2010), Ros Gill (2007, 2008, 2011), Anita Harris, (2001), Su Holmes (2001), Ariel Levy (2005), Diane Negra (2007), Angela McRobbie (2001, 2004, 2011), Renata Salecl (2011) and Natasha Walter (1998, 2010). These themes were extricated from writers who have written about girlhood and contemporary culture, and I found that they complemented the way that girls talk about their engagement with female television presenters. Using these texts, I was able to construct themes that had not only preoccupied feminist academics but were also clearly present in the transcripts of my research findings. For example, the group would discuss issues around the concept of empowerment. This was particularly noticeable in relation to the sanctioning of the actions of older female presenters, such as Trisha Goddard or Sharon Osborne, and then how the groups' comments changed dramatically when discussing younger female presenters. Theming the responses of the group allowed me to formalise the transcripts against a contemporary map of girl culture, as well as ideas around subjectivity and feminism. It also allowed me as a lecturer to draw on my experience of girls, in order to support some of my assessments of the transcripts. Consequently, I was able to explore these conversations and frame them within the context of my longitudinal observations and the informal conversations

I have had with teenage girls. I suggest that this approach is within the parameters of a feminist research methodology and draws on Ramazanoğlu and Holland's (2002, p.137) claim that 'all criteria of validity should not be abandoned just because none can be universal'.

## **The focus group profile**

The six girls who became the focus of the ethnographic research were from two different BTEC Level 3 Diploma Media courses. Four were enrolled on the Publishing and Journalism pathway and two were enrolled on the Moving Image pathway. This means that they had narrowed their preferred career choice at 16 years of age. The two girls, Rachel and Lornette on the Moving Image pathway, focused on filming and editing, whilst the other four girls, Sophie, Colette, Julie and Danielle, were involved principally in producing print design and writing copy. These four girls were in a predominantly female class (four males and ten females) and were friends with each other, but they did not know Rachel and Lornette except as students on the other pathway. The predominance of girls in this group is indicative of the way they choose print and journalism as a career choice over moving image. Rachel and Lornette were in a predominantly male class (six girls and ten males) and were not especially friendly with each other and did not usually collaborate on projects in class. I was not a personal tutor to these students – I taught filming and editing to their group and research techniques to the publishing group, which meant I saw both groups once each week and I was not involved in delivering media theory classes to either cohort. Media theory is a very minor aspect of this qualification and the students have to demonstrate some basic knowledge of audience theory and semiotics, usually through annotated posters or DVD commentary. BTEC Diploma students tend not to opt for writing long essays, as the examination board identifies them as practical students who prefer practical tasks. Although this qualification is a Level 3 one, and therefore equivalent to A-level, the students who enrol on these courses do so because they do not consider themselves “academic” in the traditional sense. Furthermore, they do not tend to do well

in written exams and instead prefer the continual assessment of BTEC Diploma vocational courses. The focus group sessions were not, in my opinion, in danger of being an extension of taught classes on representation. Had the group been part of my A-level Media Studies class then this may have been a consideration and possibly a deterrent, as the notion of looking at representations of women in the media, and talking about them in a conversational way in such a context, may have caused a problem in terms of my research method. Moreover, the girls would have been slightly more informed than students on other courses, and therefore it would have been difficult to claim that the way they engage with media images could be extrapolated across to include a broader understanding of teenage girls. It is certainly noteworthy that the focus group members were media students and therefore had some idea of media issues. However, the majority of young people have studied media at GCSE at school, and it could therefore be argued that they are equally informed. From my initial research I discovered that entrants for GCSE Media have almost doubled since 2003. (In 2003, 34,812 students studied Media at Level 2, and in 2012 entries had risen to 61,680.<sup>7</sup> Other GCSE subjects such as Performing Arts, IT, Home Economics and Music have fewer entrants). Likewise, conversations during the focus group sessions never took on a scholarly tone and the focus was usually on personal observations.

In terms of home life and background, Lornette is from a single-parent family, living with her father, and was in receipt of the EMA allowance. Danielle and Rachel live with both parents, Julie, Colette and Sophie live with their single-parent mothers and Colette was in receipt of the EMA allowance. I had met the parents of all these students at parents' evenings, although I was not particularly familiar with any of them. All of them were white British, which is a reflection of the demographic of the college as discussed earlier. This research, then, is limited by the predominance

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<sup>7</sup> Stubbs, B., 2012, *Student Performance Analysis, National Percentage Figures for GCSE grades* <http://www.bstubs.co.uk/gcse.htm> (accessed May 2013).

of white British females. Since I began my research, the college profile has changed slightly to include more diversity, and I hope to continue collecting stories and conversations from a more diverse group of teenage girls.

## Ontology

In terms of my own experience and subjectivity, I am mindful of Les Back's (1993) account of the notion of "credentialism." Here, Back chose to carry out research in a working class area because he himself grew up in a similar area, and this informed his choice of research and his sensibility whilst creating his research questions, i.e. he 'used [his] working-class origins as a way of gaining credit for this research and thus fictitiously dissolving the division between self and other' (1993, p.221). I am well aware of the difference between my own experiences as a teenager and also of the power relations between lecturer and student. It is not my intention to create similarities between myself and the cohort; however, I can make the claim that I have privileged access to teenage girls and can use many opportunities to discuss their experiences. Cultural studies and its dynamic relationships with methodology create opportunities for experience to be considered as a valid aspect of a methodology. My own experience as a female within the media industry, as described earlier, has informed my own subjectivity, while my own background as a feminist educated in a further education college in the late 1970s also informs my understanding of contemporary teenage lives, as does my understanding of what teenage femininity means for me and what I observe that femininity means for young girls at my college and elsewhere. Gray notes:

As individuals, then, we are not the authentic source of accounts of our experience, but rather mediators of our positions within the social and cultural worlds we inhabit. When we elicit accounts from others, therefore we are putting into play a repertoire of knowledges, positions, discourses and codes through which the 'individual' articulates or expresses their "own" experience (2003, p.28).

This suggests that researchers should acknowledge their own subjectivity and then use this to substantiate their experience and the experience of others as 'valuable, both ontologically and epistemologically' (Gray, 2003, p.29). Whilst I am conscious that I am bringing my own ideas and subjectivity to the issue of media influence, I could not use my own experience as a teenager as a measure, because the considerable amount of time that has elapsed since I was this age makes this experience mostly redundant, except as a way of tracking how feminist ideas have evolved since my teenage years. Moreover, the backgrounds of the girls in my focus group and throughout my time as a lecturer are not, in my opinion, similar to my own in terms of experiences, opportunity or cultural similarity.

My research was motivated by my observations of teenage girls, and I experienced these because of my access to them as a lecturer. Whilst I was carrying out the research I was also continuing my teaching role, and I decided that the best way to keep these two events separate was not to discuss the other in either context. I had thought that this might cause problems, for example if any of the girls wanted to discuss television presenters within class discussion; however, this did not occur and the girls in the focus group kept their discussions within the sessions and were able to separate out my role as a researcher and a lecturer with ease. By asking a group of teenage girls to complete questionnaires and select a top ten list of television presenters, I have brought into focus something that the girls may previously have understood as inconsequential. However, it is not possible to conduct research around a subject that the researcher recognises as relevant for cultural studies without broaching the issue with the subjects of your research. These concerns can be recognised, but they are difficult to reconcile and therefore the initial influence of the researcher has to be accepted as an unavoidable aspect of audience research. The group was very accepting of my research project and they were not especially curious or disinterested, which is in some way noteworthy because the lives of teenage girls are fairly unstructured, they tend to be pre-occupied

with their own lives and their actions are often unplanned. Their lack of curiosity about my research is typical of teenagers, which I think resulted in spontaneous and uninhibited responses in the group sessions.

After each focus group session I was able to reflect on any adjustments and amendments to the process. In the first session I had made the decision to explain that they could watch clips of television presenters and then they could talk about the clips or anything else they might have preferred. The group agreed to watch the clips, and the session became driven by them from this point. I queried their comments when I was not clear about what they had said, but mostly I watched and listened until they came to what I concluded was a natural end. The second session became more autonomous, as I had sourced some YouTube clips from which the group could choose. The participants watched these clips and also found some of their own, which made the session more unpredictable. The final session was more structured, as my intention was to explain more about the research, and after a lengthy opening introduction from me I also took part in the discussion. This differed from my other two sessions, as I became part of the group, albeit with the idea that I would respond to comments rather than lead the discussion. The three sessions then had differing power relations, which became part of my reflective analysis of the transcripts discussed in Chapter 5. I have made an assessment of the transcripts and made my research claims on the basis that the girls were given autonomy and credibility throughout. I am, however, also very aware that I was also their lecturer and to some extent a figure of authority within the focus groups sessions, as they were taking place because of my research. As Gray notes:

The real world of research is always situated and able to be situated within a context and an important part of that context is the researcher her or himself. Our own subjectivity and social identities pre-date any specific research project and will determine, not only our choice of topic, but, quite literally, what we see (2003, p. 84).

## Method

To explore my claims that teenage girls have a particular relationship with female presenters, I began by distributing two questionnaires. The purpose of the first questionnaire was to find out the names of some favoured presenters, to ascertain if the girls had considered television presenting as a career and to determine whether they had ever bought an item of clothing because they had seen it on a television presenter. These questions were intentionally broad-based and were meant to stimulate interest. I handed out 50 questionnaires to girls from three schools and colleges in the southeast. Twenty were given to my step-daughter to hand out at her school, another ten went to my son's school and another 20 were distributed by me at my college. Of the 50 handed out, 25 were returned and nine showed an initial interest in continuing with the research.

Using these results, I created a second, more focused questionnaire in which I was able to use the television presenters identified on the first questionnaire as examples of the most popular in their genre. This second questionnaire was given out to the respondents who had shown an interest in continuing with the research. For the second questionnaire, I also included additional images of television presenters that I had heard girls mention in my institution but who were not mentioned by the first respondents. My reasoning for this was that I wanted to provide as broad a range of presenters as possible so that the respondents would be able to choose their top ten favourite female television presenters. The six girls who became my focus group returned their questionnaires and had identified their top ten presenters, namely Davina McCall, Holly Willoughby, Fearne Cotton, Claudia Winkleman, Tess Daley, Cat Deeley, Trisha Goddard, Katie Price and Fern Britton. All of these presenters, excluding Trisha Goddard, are white British, which may reflect the demographic of the college and of the focus group. On the whole, there are more white British women than other ethnicities on UK television, so the likelihood is that the women these girls chose would be predominantly white. I was able to create a DVD of clips of each of these



presenters, and I chose to include in the clips a range of the types of programmes in which these women appeared, in order to give the focus group members as wide a representation as possible. Each clip was of equal length, where possible, so that each television presenter was given similar screen time.

## **Methods of interpretation**

Determining how to interpret data from ethnographic research is a complex issue. John Tulloch (2000) maps out some of the developments in cultural studies, which I found particularly useful for consideration in my own research. Tulloch asks the question: 'How do cultural theorists find legitimate methods of access to the relationship between audiences and text?' (2000, p.4). In his discussion of gender and media consumption, Tulloch considers Ang's (1996) arguments for ethnographic fieldwork, in which she defends Radway's work from the criticism that it lacks critical distance:

Ethnographic research amongst audiences – in the broad sense of engaging oneself with the unruly and the heterogeneous practices and accounts of real historical viewers and readers – helps to keep our critical discourses from becoming closed texts of Truth, because it forces the researcher to come to terms with perspectives that may not be easily integrated in a smooth, finished and coherent Theory (1996, cited in Tulloch, 2000, p.63).

This defence from Ang helps to legitimise my own place as an ethnographer and a lecturer within my focus groups. She also explains that although it would be wrong to discount the influence of political economy in popular entertainment, it would also be wrong to overlook the 'infinite diversity of viewer meanings' (in Tulloch, 2000, p.62). This becomes problematic for me, as it is very difficult to place a value on an "infinite" number of viewer meanings. For the ethnographer, then, how is it possible to create a framework that is capable of containing infinite diversity?

Significantly, Tulloch is wary of a postmodern culture which creates a multitude of options with the potential to create a series of meaningless descriptions, or a series of descriptions that become

devoid of any meaning. This cautionary note by Tulloch refers to the idea that without a rigorous interpretative framework research findings could become meaningless, if we are to give everything credibility and meaning.

The problem appears to lie in how the ethnographer interprets the views of her subjects, as giving full autonomy to the subjects and separating the findings from politics, institutions, ideological discourse and capitalism will have theoretical consequences. Furthermore, the absence of a theoretical framework to apply to the research findings will run the risk of the work having very limited value as academic research. Esther Sonnet (2003, p.256) argues that it is necessary to provide a way for the audience to be made visible, without over-determining the function of ideology. She argues that the ethnographer often sets out to ascribe 'full autonomy' to their respondents in a genuine desire to derive culturally significant meanings from their findings. Another issue to consider is therefore the over-determining of individual audience responses, which then side-lines the ideological consequences. It is very tempting when analysing the transcripts from the focus group sessions to make assumptions about how these girls respond to media images, and then make claims for all teenage girls; as such, in order to be able to claim a valid method of interpretation, it is necessary to measure their responses against a set of criteria. In this case, my research group transcripts are measured against existing work on feminism and contemporary girlhood. My own intentions as a researcher must be examined continuously, in case I attempt to make 'culturally significant meanings' in the transcripts, without proper foundation for the claims. This can be achieved through realistic self-reflexivity and an ethnographic intention to offer a set of meanings supported by comprehensively argued evidence.

Machados Borges (2006), in her study of Brazilian *telenovelas*, used both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, Machados Borges found that she often had

“official” answers to her questions, but when the recorder was switched off the interviewee would completely contradict their initial response. She began to ask much more informal questions as well as those relating to her initial three topics and found that the interviewees became more relaxed and spontaneous, observing that ‘[t]hese structured conversations (most of them were written down not tape recorded), combined with participant observation, contain much of my best information’ (2006, p.2). She also found that during the interviews or conversations, the women talked about the *telenovelas* in terms of plots and characters but also broadened their discussion to include information from other media about the actors outside the programme. These findings are of value for my focus group sessions, as I realise that it is the spontaneous remarks that arise from informal conversations which prove to be the most useful. Additionally, the work of Skeggs et al. (2008) on the construction of social class, subjectivity and reality television adopted a “text-in-action” method of enquiry, which takes into account the screening of recorded programmes in focus group sessions and the recording of group responses. The authors also make a case for the utterances and silences of the participants when watching the recorded clips. The research team found that working-class participants were able to respond more confidently:

What is significant to our argument here is that our viewing sessions enabled working-class British women to display a type of moral authority to which they did not have access in the interview situation. This is an authority not produced through the same reflexive articulation that we have seen before, but through an entirely different relationship to television. The working-class participants responded to the “reality” television participants as if they were “real” – not representations – and invested in moral positions related to their “real” lives (Skeggs et al., 2008, p.14).

The moral authorities in this case were articulations around good parenting in *Wife Swap* (RDF Media, 2002-2009), and the participants were able to feel comfortable contributing to the debate. The text-in-action method in this case was able to reveal more than, for example, semi-structured interviews. However, it is how these utterances and silences are interpreted by the academic team that will determine the significance of the contributions made by working-class women. I found this method of enquiry particularly revealing for my focus group sessions and I was able to make

much more of their relationships with female presenters through making particular note of their silences and utterances.

Geraghty (1998) has some very valid concerns about the rapport between the researcher and the interviewee. However, Gray (1992), Gillespie (1995) and Ellen Sieter (1990) all found that establishing a rapport with their subjects was vital and meant that the interviewees would build a relationship with the researcher. Geraghty's concern here is that we value the revelations of an interview where the researcher has rapport more than when they do not, and we assume that when the interviewee confides in the researcher it is important information and is prioritised as most useful. Geraghty's concern is clearly very valid and highly relevant for my own research, because the idea that developing a good relationship with respondents will elicit more "truthful" responses than if the researcher were more distant from the research group is a difficult problem to resolve. This dilemma creates an imperative for the researcher to ask themselves, what kind of relationship should a researcher have with their research group? Machados Borges is very positive about the importance of "unofficial" responses to questions, and in fact she changed her methodology to incorporate what was said in casual conversation. Clearly, it appears central to any audience research to prioritise audience responses, and it is how these responses are interpreted that throws up new challenges. As I already had a relationship with my focus group, it is difficult for me to comment properly on this issue. I feel it would have been very difficult to begin asking a group of teenage girls questions about their relationships with television presenters without first getting to know the group. It appears to me almost impossible not to have some relationship with the subjects of your research, which is still for me an issue that – at least for now – I am prepared to leave unresolved.

Turning to ways of writing up research, I found that Hermes (2009) discusses three types of scripts that can be produced from research findings: advocacy, autobiography and the chronicle. I will briefly examine these as a way of supporting my own research method.

Advocacy is a way of giving a voice to an audience. Hermes uses Radway's (1984) work on romance as an example in this respect. Whilst Radway's intention is to give Smithton women a voice to express their ideas about romance novels, she ultimately steps in and advocates change for these women, suggesting that an end to patriarchy would render redundant the practice of reading romance.

Hermes explains that the "autobiography script" allows the researcher to address particular myths from their position of knowledge. She uses her own research on reading women's magazines, undertaken in 1995, to explain that her impetus for this research was to demythologise misconceptions about these magazines:

The silliness of women's magazines is one. A second myth was the notion that everyday media use can be accessed via fan use. Not all media use is highly meaningful. On the contrary, much of it is routine filling of empty time. While as readers we might hope or even expect to pick up something of interest, this is a low key, background motivation, not a structuring element in most of women's magazine reading. A third myth was the common notion that informants are either lying or speaking the truth (2009, p.119).

She explains the term "the chronicle" as a way of writing up research that counters myths, by employing the example of web use and young people. If ethnographic research could investigate the ways in which young people use the internet proactively, it could counter the myth that young people are cultural dupes. According to Hermes, this could be a relevant use for ethnographic research, as it can function to inform policymaking. Moreover, where it is discovered that young people do discriminate in their internet use, it can counter the myth that there exists a level of "dumbing down" and superficiality amongst young audiences. Significantly, Hermes suggests that the researcher must consider the audience more inclusively and offer the opportunity for them to give feedback on the initial findings, which in turn redresses the power imbalance between author

and audience and can work to unravel some patterns of everyday life within Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. On reflection, my work fits within Hermes' notion of "the chronicle," as I have provided opportunities for girls to provide feedback in my research schedule. In addition, some of the focus group findings countered established conceptions that girls are seduced by media images. This research's transcripts provide a chronicle of teenage lives, and the research findings provide a counter argument about teenage girls and media influences, positing that girls negotiate with images of women.

Hermes' keynote speech<sup>8</sup> makes the call for ethnographic audience researchers to present their findings back to their participants for further contributions. She recommends that academics 'offer themselves as a resource for a community', by 'giving feedback to your audience' (2007). The current research presented a real opportunity to explore this "ethnographic turn," and I factored in the opportunity to feed back to my focus group, a method for which the shortcomings thereof will be discussed later in Chapter 4.

Alongside the approaches described is the importance of acknowledging the institutional economies that surround the audience-text relationship. For example, television networks, production companies, agencies representing presenters, the press and regulatory bodies such as the PCC, ASA and OFCOM<sup>9</sup> all have a bearing on how the audience creates meaning from texts. The dynamic nature of these and other organisations has significance for how and what audiences are able to

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<sup>8</sup> *Transforming Audiences*, University of Westminster, 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> The PCC, The Press Complaints Commission, was a self-regulated press organisation. It was scrutinised and restructured in 2012 following the phone-hacking news story instigated by *The Guardian* newspaper exclusive in July 2009, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jul/08/murdoch-papers-phone-hacking>. The Leveson Inquiry recommended that the PCC be disbanded and a more rigorous and impartial body take its place. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/mar/30/leveson-inquiry-regulation-pcc>. ASA, The Advertising Standards Authority, serves to regulate advertising standards in print and television. OFCOM, The Office of Communications, serves to regulate radio, television and telecommunications.

experience through media images. The recent restructuring of the press, instigated by the phone-hacking scandal, the closure of the *News of the World* and the subsequent side-lining of News International and specifically Rupert Murdoch as a press and media mogul in the UK, will have some consequences for audiences.

The question of how to carry out audience research is therefore a complex problem, as the researcher needs to understand the conditions under which meaning is created by the institution and read by the audience. Likewise, an understanding of the kinds of relationships that are forged between researcher and subject, and how this relationship impacts on the findings, needs to be established, which creates a complex set of issues; for example, to what extent should the researcher remain an objective observer and how much value should the researcher ascribe to a particular set of responses? By accepting the possibility of an infinite number of audience interpretations, how can the academic make meaning from the findings? If the researcher applies a set of criteria to their ethnographic research, there is a danger that they are limiting the scope of their findings and effectively dismissing other areas of cultural interest conveyed by the audience. Finally, new technology has created new types of communities, which has fundamentally impacted on the role of the ethnographer. I will return to these issues in Chapter 5, wherein I present the findings from my fieldwork.

Initially my understanding of teenage girls was based on my own interpretations through observations, which acted as the catalyst for this work. The appearance of T-shirt slogans such as “Porn Star,” the *Playboy* logo on girl’s clothing and accessories, overheard conversations about sex and the casualness with which young girls talked about their own sexual experiences, all served to awaken my curiosity about how they survive their teenage years. This, together with their intense conversations about existing female presenters, made it impossible for me not to want to find out

more about their lives. Whilst I understood that at aged 16, teenage girls are often vulnerable and naïve, they are also cynical and surprisingly knowing about gender relations, media advertising and how they are being addressed. It is this combination of naivety and knowingness that I would like to explore further.



## Chapter 2

### **Women working in television – the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s**

In this chapter I present an overview of the presence of women working in television from the late 1970s to 2000 and beyond. I have used the late 1970s and early 1980s as a starting point, because the policymaking that took place at this time enabled women the opportunity to have a greater presence on screen and in production offices. The Annan Report of 1977 looked specifically at ways to restructure the BBC and also considered the possibility of a fourth channel. These initiatives were forerunners to the deregulation of broadcast television, instigated by the 1979 Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, as well as the Broadcasting Act 1990. One of the consequences of these policies was the broadening of opportunities for women in front of the camera, while one of the initiatives arising from the deregulation of British broadcasting was the breakfast television genre which began in 1983. In this chapter, I identify and describe the advent of breakfast television as the place where women began to take a more prominent role in television programmes. Women such as Angela Rippon, Anna Ford, Selina Scott and Anne Diamond became familiar figures on television screens. These women were reported on by the press frequently, and usually their femininity was the significant factor and the subject of the press reportage. I am making the claim that breakfast television was a defining moment in identifying and developing the ways that women in television are represented today.

The ways in which the press and audiences responded to women presenting breakfast television served to define these presenters by their femininity and also served to establish a way of creating a relaxed and informal news style that still persists today. The use of female presenters to establish informality, and sets that resembled living rooms with sofas and coffee tables, enabled the genre to

use the discourse of domesticity to attract audiences. The informality and domesticity of breakfast television was received by critics and audiences with some scepticism.<sup>10</sup> Female presenters were at the heart of breakfast television, which only served to secure the notion that breakfast television was neither “serious” news nor of any journalistic value.

The purpose of investigating women in television from this time period is to undertake a comprehensive analysis of how teenage girls have made their attachments to female television presenters and, indeed, to explore how they interpret these women’s careers in terms of success. This analysis is useful because it will help me to understand how contemporary female television presenters have come to have such a highly visible and significant presence in broadcast television. It will also enable me to reflect on how and why these women have become an important (albeit transient) part of the lives of the teenage girls in my research group. This chapter will explore the representations of women on television and will consider if the number of women working behind the camera influences the content of television production.

This kind of research will enable me to gain a fuller understanding of how women in front of the camera have developed their careers and also in which genres they appear to play a significant role. An analysis of the historical background of both the media and women who work in the media will signify how the achievements of early female broadcasters have acted as the vanguard for contemporary women in broadcasting. Significantly, my research suggests that the birth of the breakfast television genre played a major role in shaping the kinds of media texts in which women have become prominent and popular. I see this genre as a place of influence for the analysis of

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<sup>10</sup> Plunket, J., 2013, BBC Breakfast time: 30 years of cereal, “If you look back you think, no wonder people were taken aback and thought it was vulgar,” says Alison Ford, the incumbent editor of BBC1’s early morning programme, now simply called Breakfast. “It wasn’t just hugely different to have proper programming in the mornings, it was a shock to the system.” *The Guardian* online, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/17/bbc1-breakfast-time-30-years-cereal-tv> (accessed November 2103).

women working in television and therefore for the reception of these women by the young girls in my research group.

I have investigated some existing academic research on the breakfast television genre (Wieten and Pantti, 2005), which has been useful because it describes its rise in popularity. I have, however, found very little scholarly work on television presenters, so therefore I intend to provide an account of the “worth” of these presenters, for cultural studies and for my own research. I suggest that the dearth of academic material about television presenters is noteworthy in itself. James Bennett’s (2011) recent work on fame and celebrity has been able to identify how television personalities function for audiences, and his work has been of great interest and relevance. More commonly, academic investigations focus on the programme text and the audience. Much work has been produced around programmes that often have female presenters driving the programme, but without a serious investigation of these women. Using reality television as an example, Annette Hill (2002), Richard Kilborn (2003), Jonathan Bignell (2005), Gareth Palmer (2002), John Corner (2002) and Estella Tincknell and Parvati Raghuram (2002) have all carried out investigations of the text, the political economy surrounding the text, contestants and the institutions involved. None of these scholarly works has considered the significance of the role of the presenter, yet it is these women who inform the conversations of teenage girls and young women. This chapter will follow the rise of the female presenter so that I can map these developments across my fieldwork and provide an account of teenage audience reception.

It is useful at this point to develop some definitions of the term “presenter,” which is a commonly used term to describe the individual hosting a broadcast programme. The term appears to be a catch-all description for all genres, regardless of cultural value, by which I mean that an established news broadcaster on Channel 4 is referred to as a presenter and the hosts of reality shows are also called presenters. News programmes originally used the terms “newsreader”, “news broadcaster”

and/or “newscaster,” which tended to suggest that the people involved in this act were also involved in the news-making process and then presented this information to the audience. The term “casterettes” was informally introduced in the 1970s and used in a derogative way by male journalists to describe those pioneer women reading the news. This practice, I suggest, identifies the beginnings of the devaluing of the role of broadcasting information to audiences. Both terms (“casterettes” and “presenter”) suggest that the person does not have any control of the items they are delivering and are facilitators of someone else’s messages. The arrival of breakfast television, which provided news and entertainment (infotainment), changed the way that broadcast journalists were referred to, and the term “presenter” became commonly used. In some ways, the term has been devalued consistently over the years. The word makes no linguistic connection with the idea that presenters carry knowledge, and I suggest this is due to the increase in the number of female presenters. Today, the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV all describe their news broadcasters as “presenters,” and the term “newscaster” appears to have disappeared.

The breakfast television genre, I suggest, is of great importance to the ways in which audiences understand images of women in television today. Breakfast television made popular the convention of a male and female presenting team, but it also shifted emphasis in the way the news was delivered, using a friendly infotainment approach rather than creating a “serious” journalistic environment. Correspondingly, the commonly described assumption by journalists and media critics that television programmes have succumbed to “dumbing down” is in some part a result of the breakfast genre. Ron Neil, the first editor of the BBC breakfast show, comments on his time as editor in 1983: “In the first few weeks I was instructed by the DG to remove Russell Grant the astrologer, and insert a “Thought for the Day” slot each morning,” remembers Neil. “I think he was under pressure from the governors. I declined and somehow survived”” (Plunkett, 2013). I will consider these changes in more detail in this chapter.

During my investigation, I understood that the women who started their careers in the news genre were to some extent the forerunners of the female television presenters that attract teenage attention today. Female news broadcasters such as Angela Rippon led the way for the influx of women presenting breakfast television in the 1980s and '90s, for example Selina Scott and Anne Diamond. These women created opportunities for other women, and by the time *Big Brother* was first broadcast in 2000 (hosted by Davina McCall), the presence of women in all areas of programming had begun to appear natural and conventional.

I would also like to consider some developments in broadcasting policy that contributed to the increase in the number of visible women in the media. These developments, significantly the Annan Report (1977), The Peacock Committee recommendations (1985) and the Broadcasting Act of 1990, all contributed to the broadening out of media career opportunities for women. Previously, broadcasting had remained predominantly male in terms of people in front of and behind the camera, but opportunities to redress the gender balance came with the deregulation process that began in the 1980s. These policies paved the way for new genres of television programming provision, for example breakfast television, reality and daytime television and subsequently the rapid and overarching rise of celebrity culture. I recognise that these events, although seemingly unconnected, are all interrelated trajectories when tracking the progression of women working in television. An analysis of the way these paths intersect is very valuable when considering the consumption by teenage girls of representations of women in television.

Over these decades, the numbers of female presenters have significantly increased, with many more women fronting a range of television content such as reality shows, news, documentaries and popular entertainment. Overall, women are visible across the majority of broadcast media content, and a report from the Global Media Monitoring Project found that 57% of television presenters worldwide are female (Gallagher, 2005), which would suggest that a range of representations of

women in terms of age, ethnicity and sexuality would be evident on screen. However, recent research (White, Morell et al., 2012) has found that this is not necessarily the case, and the representation of women in broadcasts is still quite narrow. The research highlights, for example, that the gender and age of people in broadcast television are still limited and unrepresentative:

This gender inequality was also identified as a concern in relation to the news and factual programmes. There was a concern that there is no female equivalent of David Attenborough and that male newsreaders were much older than their female equivalents (2012, p.53).

The research project also found that respondents were conscious that television female presenters tended to be from a younger age range:

This pattern of fewer older women on television is reflected in opinion surveys: an ICM poll in 2009 commissioned by the charities Age Concern and Help the Aged (now Age UK) found that 71% of respondents were happy to see more older women on screen, while at the same time 80% agreed that in practice, television favoured younger presenters. The vast majority of respondents also said they believed there should be older women reading the news, with only 9% disagreeing (2012, p.8).

These two monitoring projects begin to highlight the limited range of representations that audiences are offered. Members of my research group were born in the early 1990s, and as such I think have been aware of two dominant discourses. Firstly, they are presented constantly with the idea that women are empowered people free to create highly respected career choices and enjoy an array of opportunities in an equal environment. Secondly, the girls experience a limited representation of women on television in terms of age, ethnicity, social class and sexuality. These two conflicting discourses become a part of some of the ways that girls begin to form ideas of femininity and subjectivity. In the light of this recent research, it is useful to reflect here on the way that employment patterns, broadcasting regulation and cultural attitudes have changed, and to explore how these have impacted on the representation and visibility of women in broadcast television. Clearly, this will inform the way audiences and in particular my research group will be able to interpret the ways in which women are seen in the media.

## **Establishing a balanced gendered broadcasting landscape**

Early broadcasts in the UK had few women television newscasters, Angela Rippon (ITV news broadcaster 1975-1981) being perhaps the most visible and successful. She was not, however, the first woman newsreader on British television; this was Barbara Mandell, working for the BBC in 1955. Barbara Mandell, however, was only invited to read the lunchtime news, not the more prestigious evening news. In addition, she did this against a painted backdrop of a kitchen scene (Thumim, 1998, p.97) This goes some way toward anchoring images of women within the domestic sphere and setting the agenda for other broadcasters to follow.

Decades later, research has indicated that the representations of women in broadcasting were inevitably coupled with and anchored by traditionally feminine or sexualised notions of women. Margaret Gallagher's (ed. 2005, p.115) report, on the impact of monitoring media images of women, suggests that a gradual acceptance that the way gender is portrayed 'has an impact on the way people "see" or understand the media'. This monitoring project collates evidence of gender stereotyping on a global level and attempts to advocate changes in how images of women are represented. Gallagher suggests that through the cooperation of many pressure groups there is now an increasing awareness of how gender is portrayed in the media, and she suggests that this will help to bring about changes to reflect more positive and balanced representations of women and gender roles. What this research has highlighted is that for my research group, the portrayal of gender in the media is quite limited, which is important to remember when considering how teenage girls discuss the women they see on television, in print and online.

Using women newsreaders as a departure point, I will briefly explore the development of these women in a wider perspective, in order to provide a better understanding of from where the

presenters in contemporary broadcasting originated. It is the experiences of these pioneering women that have determined how female representation is shaped and understood today. Patricia Holland's (1987, p.133) analysis of women newsreaders examines how they were received in the national press. The *Evening Standard* (6<sup>th</sup> June 1979), in their news items, referred to female newsreaders as 'newscasterettes'. Holland suggests this is a way of 'limiting femininity', as it clearly references these women in a sexualised rather than a professional context. Holland uses Angela Rippon and Anna Ford as examples of how the press attempted to define women newsreaders through representations of femininity and sexuality, thus inhibiting any possible interpretation of them as professionals. She describes the difficulties women working within news production had to overcome to be successful and how these women have helped to change the face of news broadcasts. Holland (1987, p134) offers an example of how women struggled against prejudice, some women were "barred from reading the news by an independent TV station – because they distract the attention of male viewers." Anna Ford and Angela Rippon were 'described as deadly rivals, like Joan Collins and Linda Evans...' (1987, p.135), and Holland suggests that this is a deliberate attempt to undermine the authority and professionalism of women in the media by referencing glamorous soap stars from US shows such as *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989).

Holland (1987, p.133) reflects that the attitudes around women and television at that time were a clear indication of the obstacles women had to overcome to become a successful professional broadcaster. *The Evening Standard's* editorial on women newsreaders states:

The paradox is that the harder they strive being serious in the solemn business of international news, the more delightfully coquettish and feminine they appear. By ignoring their femininity they heighten it (6th June 1979).

As discussed earlier, Angela Rippon's career as a newsreader began in the 1970s, closely followed by that of Anna Ford. Holland points out that they were often treated as a novelty, and responses in the press were to sexualise the two women and also suggest that the two professional journalists were in competition with each other. She cites the following examples from national newspapers:



Could I suggest that Miss Ford cuts the frosty lipstick and shiny blush-on which makes my screen look wet and slippery?

Angela is forceful, even dominant. In how many viewers' secret dreams does she deliver the Nine O'clock News in black leather...?

Forget about legs, storms Anna. Television news girl Anna Ford is fed up with people trying to compare her legs with Angela Rippon's. Anna is also unhappy with "show us your legs" cat calls wherever she goes (in Holland 1987, p.135).

Clearly, the kind of news coverage here is particular to women newsreaders. This focus on the sexual and traditional ideas of femininity serves to limit these women within a feminine persona and exclude them from any serious journalistic attributes, and it even disconnects them from opposing feminist narratives of progress. By inference, then, this suggests that these women lack any authoritative understanding of the news stories they cover. Pauline Frederick, an American broadcaster, commented on her early experiences as a news presenter:

Chief objections raised were that women's voices carry no authority, they don't transmit well, that women don't listen to women, and there's a tradition that men broadcasters should deal with the news (in Holland 1987, p.134).

However, despite these significant setbacks, Holland points out that news broadcasts today conventionally use a male and female anchor team, making women newsreaders more inclusive and conventional. Therefore, it appears that some battles have been fought and won by the early women broadcasters. From my research I understood that, although there are more male and female teams in broadcasting today, there is some argument that this has led to the trivialisation of news reporting. I will discuss this later in this chapter when I examine scheduling and gender. So in fact, whilst some battles have been won, the types of programmes women appear on are still predominantly gendered female in terms of narrative and intent.

Research (GMMP, 2005) has proven that presenters occupy a large proportion of broadcasting on-screen time. Therefore, the ways in which these women are represented, the kinds of audience reception they evoke and the influence of these representations need to be examined for a fuller understanding of the ways in which the broadcast landscape is gendered. For example, the impact

of a male-dominated industry at all levels of management and production should be a determining factor when considering the ways audiences respond to media texts. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner's (2004) research in the field of media and gender presents an overarching imperative to examine media constructs of reality. Their work engages with the ways in which the media sets out representations and therefore helps to shape ideologies, beliefs and values about the world in which we live. They include in this research an analysis of the extent to which organisations and industries reflect a male-dominated world and the kinds of initiatives and strategies that have become necessary to balance these gender dynamics. To examine the ways that women in media industries may have been marginalised, contemporary news stories concerning the age and appearance of women newsreaders should be a significant place to start.

National news stories dealing with accusations of ageism and sexism in broadcasting have become common. In September 2008, Selina Scott, news broadcaster and television presenter, made the decision to sue Channel Five over age discrimination, as her employer overlooked her request to cover a maternity leave post and chose a younger presenter instead. Scott's decision to make public this case of ageism and sexism is only one of many complaints by older female journalists, in that whilst male broadcasters are still on our television when they are over 50, many female presenters are excluded from the screen.

Veteran broadcaster and journalist Joan Bakewell was the first woman presenter on BBC's flagship arts and current affairs programme *Late Night Line Up* (BBC 1964-1972). In a newspaper article she discusses Scott's decision to take C5 to court over age discrimination:

Scott speaks for many of her age. With the recent departures of Moira Stuart, Kate Adie and Anna Ford from BBC news, there is now a widespread perception – among viewers as much as among broadcasters – that there is a serious case of ageism at the heart of British news and current affairs. How bad is it? And why does it matter? (Bakewell, 2008)

The newspaper article continues with a brief comparison of women and men in television broadcasting. Bakewell began her television career in the 1960s and was told then that women would never be given the job of reading the BBC news. She cites Angela Rippon and Anna Ford as the women that broke through the barriers facing female broadcasters in the 1970s. This was followed in the 1980s by a new generation of women who were able to add a gender balance to the then male-dominated newsrooms. However, whilst these men are still broadcasting over 25 years later, many of the women have been side-lined or replaced, for example Julia Somerville, Sue Lawley, Jan Leeming and Moira Stewart, to name a few:

All the women on *Newsnight* would joke together about how the tough older male would always be lead presenter, while a woman was given the secondary role – softer stories and knowing her place. We joked, too, about the obvious stereotypes: the craggy world-weary buccaneer male reporters – Sandy Gall, the late Charles Wheeler... We thought then that it was all destined to change. But where today are the wrinkly female equivalents of Trevor McDonald and Peter Sissons, Nick Owen and Jon Snow? Kirsty Wark stands alone, and she, after all, is merely middle aged. Older women are missing from news and current affairs (Bakewell, 2008).

When women are cast in the lead presenter role, there is still an accommodation of their gender. Consider the news on C5, presented by broadcaster Natasha Kaplinsky. The title, *News with Natasha* (2008-2010), suggests a kind of celebrity-led programme instead of a more traditional news format. The use of Kaplinsky's first name suggests familiarity for the audience not usually available with male newsreaders such as Jon Snow or Krishnan Guru Murthy on *Channel 4 News*. Many newspapers reported Kaplinsky's appointment to C5, focusing on her salary (£1,000,000 per year) and lifestyle, while Peter Sissons, an established and experienced news presenter, commented that newsreaders should be 'more than just pretty faces' and attributed Kaplinsky's success 'down to her looks' (Gould, 2009).

These comments highlight an intense concentration on Kaplinsky's physical appearance that clearly undermines her professionalism. Holland (1987, p.136) makes the point that the broad expectation of women in the news is that '[they] are about sexuality and the news is not', and that there is a

‘continuing effort to remind women of their inescapable position as women and “not men.”’ She goes on to state that this is in some way an attempt to subordinate women and undermines their right to speak by drawing attention away from speech and towards their visual representations. Holland also makes the point that usually representations of women in television are emotive in their nature; for example, in soap opera and drama, their bodies are usually part of the television spectacle. Therefore, the spectacle of women reading the news is a non-traditional representation of women. Instead, these women take up a masculine space where any displays of emotion are deemed inappropriate, both for the genre convention and for men. Although Holland refers to a much earlier period in broadcasting, the comments made by Sissons, Billen and other male journalists and broadcasters above suggests that little has changed. Deborah Jermyn (2013), whose contemporary research provides some interesting reflections of women and age in factual programmes, notes that:

British factual television... has seemingly institutionalised the neglect and erasure of its older women “talent” from primetime, a point which seems at odds with the conception just outlined of TV as a “feminised” medium (2013, p.75).

Jermyn notes further that the lack of opportunity for older women in cinema has been documented and discussed in terms of the effect on audiences; however, the absence of older women in factual programming is equally significant. Jermyn identifies Arlene Phillips, the judge on *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC 2004- ), as a useful case study. Phillips, a well-known choreographer and the only female judge on the show, was removed from the panel and replaced by a woman who was younger and had fewer credentials. The BBC 1 controller Jay Hunt gave the need for ‘an overall refresh’ (Jermyn, 2013, p.79) as an explanation for Phillip’s dismissal. Jermyn suggests that:

The way to refresh *Strictly*, which was perceived by Hunt to be to sack the show’s only female judge, echoes and underlines the sense in contemporary popular culture that it is aging women who must bear the burden of constantly seeking to monitor and enhance their appearance in the (gendered) pursuit of self-improvement (2013, p.79).

The focus group usually had a different response to older women on screen than they had towards their favourite younger female presenters – they were on the whole more forgiving and less

threatened by the behaviour of older women. The ways in which these women are absent from television formats such as news and “serious” programmes, and also defined and assessed by their age in light entertainment formats, as described by Jermyn, may be a contributing factor to the groups’ understanding of older presenters – a notion which I shall consider in Chapter 5 when I present my analysis of the focus group transcripts.

It is important to include in this investigation not only representations of women in front of camera but also the number of women who work behind the camera as producers, directors or senior managers. It can be argued that if media institutions and production processes contribute to an unequal gender balance by employing more men than women, then media institutions present a predominantly masculine interpretation of the world. Mary Holland (1980) presented a paper at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, called *Out of the Bedroom and on to the Board*, offering figures which showed that of the 157 producers at the BBC only 25 were women, while at ITV only ten of the 74 producers were female (in Darlow, 2004, p.274). Holland used these figures to argue that this gender imbalance has consequences for programme content and managerial decision-making. Furthermore, a 1985 report, *Women in BBC Management*, revealed that of the 589 secretaries employed, only 16 were promoted (Tynne, 1998). And in 1990, a survey of 79 broadcasting organisations found that women account for only 10 per cent of the key decision makers in organisations such as on the BBC Board of Governors and the Independent Television Commission (Arthurs, 1994, p.91). In the 33 years of The Guardian Edinburgh International Television Festival, only three of the keynote McTaggart lectures have been delivered by women (Brown, 2009).

The inference in these reports is that programmes commissioned and produced by women would more likely portray “positive” representations of women and include content that would appeal to women, or at least alter existing perceptions thereof on television. There are two approaches to

consider here, in order to examine the validity of this notion. The first is discussed by Ros Coward (1987, p.96), who is critical of the lack of programmes on television during the 1980s that specifically addressed women's issues. She notes that there had been much debate about the need for separate women's programmes on television and cites BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* (1973- ) as a successful formula. Television executives had defended their decision not to make programmes specifically for women by asserting that it would be discriminatory. Coward countered with the argument that this has not been the case for largely male programming, such as football and snooker, and her argument is that representations of women on television give female audiences a different perspective on issues and a 'women's viewpoint' could be established (1987, p.96).

In contrast, Jane Arthurs (1994, p.82), almost a decade later, considers whether an increase in the number of women making television programmes would actually change the nature of the programmes' content. Her argument is that if we make the assumption that only women are able to present a woman's perspective, then we are also making the assumption that this ability is determined by a biological and social identity that is fixed and different from men. She suggests the danger here is in engaging with a theoretical position of "essentialism," which means that gender identity is fixed – a notion linked closely to the idea that women's roles are naturally focused on reproduction and nurturing, and they cannot therefore be on equal terms with men in any capacity. However, Arthurs accepts that it is necessary to recognise that women may have different aspirations and experiences and need to find a way of working within institutions without becoming completely absorbed into a 'system of cultural production that is already constituted as patriarchal' (1994, p.83). In terms of my research group, its reading of the female presenters is that they specifically deliver a female perspective for their audience, by which I refer to the ways in which the members of the group discuss the lives of these women and how they connect directly to ideas about patriarchy and contemporary notions of empowerment. What my research suggests is that women in broadcasting have become absorbed in a "patriarchal system of production," but in such

a way as to render the process “acceptable” and “empowering,” thus suggesting the “patriarchal system” is barely noticeable and therefore women appear to be empowered.

Arthurs’ caution regarding gender essentialism is exemplified through her reference to research carried out by Coyle and Bhavnani<sup>11</sup> (1994, p.86), who looked at *Crimewatch UK* (BBC1, 1984- ) in 1991. They chose this programme because it had a predominantly female production team, and the research set out to establish whether this impacted on the nature of the programme content. They found that although the working environment was ‘open, supportive and participative, using power to empower others’ (1994, p.85), the study did not find any evidence of the predominantly female team having a significant influence on the nature and content of the programme which could be read in feminist terms. Arguments against these findings would be that *Crimewatch UK* has a well-established formula and that it would be difficult to alter the content and tone of the programme, regardless of the gender balance of the production team. From these arguments by both Coward and Arthurs, it is difficult to assess what kind of impact women have or can potentially have on the nature and content of the programmes in which they are involved. Coward suggests that none of the programmes made for and by women in the early days of Channel 4, for example *20/20 Vision* (1982), *Broadside* and *Watch the Woman* (1985), was given the opportunity to develop and ‘prove itself’ (1987, p.100), and Channel 4 did not re-commission them at the end of their series. This is a valid observation, as it is difficult to establish the success or failure of a programme over the space of one series, although it is impossible to develop into a proven fact. Whilst a female team making programmes about specifically female issues was controversial in the 1980s, the cultural shifts in programming output today would find this kind of initiative redundant, perhaps because there is a mis-perception of equality, and democratisation for women broadcasting today is entrenched

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Coyle and Reena Bhavani, *Watching the Crimewatchers: Women Gender and Difference at the BBC*, London, May 1991.

seamlessly and represented, albeit within the light entertainment schedule. Many of these programmes are presented by women and their content is driven by a female narrative, suggesting that women are not marginalised and are in fact well catered for; for example, the programme *Loose Women* (ITV, 1999-) has a team of women co-presenting a show about women's issues. The earlier shows discussed by Coward, such as *Broadside* and *20/20 Vision*, were advertised as current affairs programmes and addressed issues of gender equality and sexuality. *Loose Women*, by contrast, redefines the notion of women's issues to represent stereotypical notions of femininity, as it focuses on self-improvement, marriage and relationships. The female presenters on this show are not, however, the creators of the show and therefore not responsible for the content or tone. So whilst the impression is that women are highly visible and driving content on television, the evidence suggests that there is a marginalisation in terms of the content of their shows.

A census carried out by Skillset in 2006<sup>12</sup> looked at employment patterns and found that the overall percentage of women working in the audio-visual industry was 38 per cent. This figure had remained the same as the census in 2003 and 2004. Terrestrial television has the highest proportion of women, at 50 per cent of the workforce, which would suggest gender parity. In 2010, the organisation Media Parents<sup>13</sup> was set up, by women working as series producers in television, to accommodate the long hours and inflexibility of working contracts and the problems these cause for parents. The initiative behind this organisation is the acknowledgement that many women are not able to continue their media careers to their full capabilities because of the inflexibility of their working contracts. Their objective is:

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<sup>12</sup> The Sector Skills Council For The Audio Visual Industries, 2006, Employment census 2006; The Results of the sixth census of the Audio Visual Industries, Skills For Business, available at, [http://www.creativeskillset.org/creativeskillset/press/releases/article\\_4438\\_1.asp](http://www.creativeskillset.org/creativeskillset/press/releases/article_4438_1.asp) (accessed January 2009)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mediaparents.co.uk/> (accessed February 2013)



... to help freelance working parents or anyone who wants to work flexibly to balance the demands of media and other commitments, and to make it easier for employers to find this highly skilled and experienced part of the media workforce ([www.mediaparents.co.uk](http://www.mediaparents.co.uk)).

This kind of initiative will clearly support women working in the media and perhaps redress some of the inequalities identified at the top of the management structure in television. This in turn may have some effect on the kinds of representations of women in front of the screen. However, a fuller investigation of the correlation between women in the television industry and the content and nature of programmes would need a breakdown of roles and programmes over the past twenty years. Whilst this is worthy of research at some other time, for the purposes of this work it is to note that employment patterns and a woman's perspective are factors for consideration.

The kinds of representations available of women in television may be significant for teenage girls and the way they negotiate the discourses created around media texts, as these discourses contribute to their understanding of professional women in media industries. My own research findings carried out with teenage girls suggests that they make assumptions about the professional capabilities of these presenters. Their comments suggest that they feel that the female presenters are best suited to feminised texts such as *Big Brother* (C4, Endemol, 2000-2010) or *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC1, 2004-), rather than more "serious" media texts such as politics and current affairs. Therefore, an analysis of the range of opportunities and representations of women in television becomes particularly relevant when considering what professionalism means for women on television and for teenage audiences.

## **Broadcasting legacies**

Developments in broadcasting during the 1980s in the UK, together with the Conservative government's broadcasting policies under Margaret Thatcher, are fertile grounds for analysis, as they may have a bearing on programme content and audience reception today, due to their enduring

legacies in both industrial and post-feminist contexts (to be discussed in Chapter 5). The restructuring of broadcasting created the opportunity for more women to work in the broadcast industry. However, these opportunities, whilst welcome, were also limiting, as most of them were involved with “lowbrow” shows. This restructuring set the tone and agenda for contemporary programmes, as opportunities for women today have improved, albeit they still remain based largely in this “lowbrow” sector.

Goodwin’s (1998) work on television broadcasting policy under the Tories explains that prior to Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government’s election victory in 1979, the Annan Committee report, published in 1977 and called *The Future of Broadcasting*, had already recommended an end to the ‘cosy duopoly’ of BBC and ITV. Audience shares around that time were: BBC1 39%, BBC2 12% and ITV 49% (Goodwin 1998, p.14). Clearly these percentages would create a sense of complacency whereby neither channel would feel an imperative to change its provision, as ITV and BBC had an almost fifty-fifty split in audience share. Prior to the Annan Report, Goodwin notes there was a broad academic awareness of the flawed nature of the existing broadcasting structure. Garnham’s British Film Institute monograph in 1972 describes this as:

a system in which two powerful institutions responsible not to the public but to the real, though hidden, pressures of power elite, government, big business and the cultural establishment, manipulate the public in the interest of that power elite... (cited in Goodwin 1998, p.18).

However, the Annan report recognised this complacency, which spearheaded changes in regulations during the 1980s:

[B]roadcasting should be “opened up.” At present, so it is argued, the broadcasters have become an over-mighty subject, an unelected elite, more interested in preserving their own organisation intact than in enriching the nation’s culture. Dedicated to the outworn concepts of balance and impartiality, how can broadcasters reflect the multitude of opinions in our pluralist society (Annan Report, cited in Goodwin, 1998, p.17)?

Clearly, there was recognition of the need for change in broadcasting policy so that a broader cultural agenda could be explored. The narrowness of the existing and mostly unaccountable programming policies could be widened to include more liberal and pluralist ideologies emerging in 1970s Britain. The second-wave feminist movement, established and developing at this time, was a part of this changing ideological landscape. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the growth of the Women's Movement in the UK during this decade complemented this notion of liberalism.

The Annan Committee, which had been initially set up by a Labour government in 1970, took into account criticisms of the duopoly. Amongst its recommendations, the report set out that broadcasting organisations should be 'more responsive to the opinions of their audience' (1998, p.39). It reinforced the need for a fourth channel and to extend the life of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), which made plans in February 1979 for granting renewals of existing broadcasting licences (due to run out in 1981) and advertised for applications for new breakfast licences in November and December 1980. *TV:am* was awarded the licence in November 1982 on the understanding that it delivered on its programme promises, while the BBC had its licence renewed in 1981 for 15 years. The Annan Committee, then, did not set out to commercialise or necessarily open up the sector to a free market economy. Through research and consultation, its recommendations were to open up the channels to include more diversity, and they recognised the changing nature of Britain in the 1970s and 80s, commenting 'We do not believe that the present structure of broadcasting, which was devised to meet the needs of the 1960s, will be adequate to meet the demands of the 1980s' (Annan Report, 1977, cited in Goodwin, 1998, p.19).

On the whole, the Annan Committee was in favour of both ITV and BBC provision, with the acknowledgement that the sector could be expanded. Goodwin describes how the Conservative government in 1979 inherited the recommendation for a fourth channel and developed the original ideas set out for a channel that should have a "distinctive character" into a successful channel with a

‘free-market policy’ (Goodwin 1998, p.34). Sylvia Harvey’s (1994) account of the culture and environment at the time suggests that the ethos of the channel was to reflect an ‘environment of social and cultural change... In an attempt to pull within the frame of television what had been excluded... issues from rising female expectations to rocketing divorce rate ...’ (in Arthurs, 1994, p.117). A fourth channel, in 1982, opened up broadcasting to the independent market so that the broadcasting sector could incorporate new production companies, new talent and new kinds of programming. This, in turn, brought about chances for equal opportunities in employment in television and more women working in the industry.

A consequence of deregulation was that both the BBC and ITV needed to learn how to attract audiences and have a broad appeal, in order to be able to compete successfully with the emerging expansion of the broadcasting market and ultimately with satellite and digital provision. In 1979, people employed in the television industry had permanent contracts. The BBC had approximately 16,500 employees and ITV 12,400, which effectively meant that the majority of output from both channels was made in house and the 86/14 rule had been agreed so that only 14% of programming could be ‘foreign-filmed programmes’ (Goodwin 1998, p.16). However, an end to the cosy duopoly of the BBC and ITV also meant a restructuring of the workforce, which had consequences for women in broadcasting in terms of opening up employment opportunities. These policies created opportunities in front of and behind the camera, and it is this legacy that teenage girls today are experiencing through the number of female presenters on television.

Jeremy Tunstall (1993, p.177) conducted interviews with 37 women producers, who mostly agreed that the 1980s had brought about significant change for the better. By the end of the decade, women in senior management at the BBC had increased from 40 to 60, and the number of female producers and assistant producers from 181 to 372. This was an enormous change for the BBC, and programme departments that were run by women gained a reputation for welcoming females

into the department, which in turn attracted more women. In all, 43 per cent of graduate trainees were women, which made a significant difference to the technical skills they could offer. For Channel 4, 30% of middle managers were women, 21% of senior managers and 27% of principle names in the independent sector. Although this was a great improvement overall, females employed in the television sector during the 1980s were aware that male colleagues were promoted before them and their own progression was much slower, as some found they would spend significantly longer in lower level jobs than men. Tunstall (1993, p.178) notes that researcher roles, viewed as the bottom of the hierarchy, were still predominantly female, while more “technical” occupations, such as camera, sound and lighting technicians, were predominantly male.

Women still faced outdated attitudes. Tunstall notes that in his conversation with female executives at the BBC that they recalled an interview situation where:

On one such occasion the successful female candidate, it was said, had been asked at the “board” interview in the BBC whether picking up the children from school (“the school run”) would be likely to pose difficulties. Some large areas of television still have very few women in senior positions (Tunstall 1993, p.187).

Arthurs (1994, p.96) points out that there did appear to be significant changes for women in the broadcast industry at this time, such as skills training, childcare support and the implementation of equal opportunities. This does not, however, take into account the day-to-day power relations played out through gender differences. So, whilst it was possible for women to become directors or camera operators, the working environment could be hostile and women would be unsupported and susceptible to ridicule. The formation of the online facility *Media Parents* in 2010, discussed earlier in this chapter, is testament to the idea that women working in media production are still unsupported.

Before the launch of Channel 4 (November, 1982), there were virtually no independent television companies. Mostly, independent production companies worked in film or advertising. However, by 1990, there were approximately 1,000 companies (Tunstall 1993, p.158). Channel 4, in one year, had

made programmes with 668 different production companies. By 1991, women occupied three of the eight top programme posts at the BBC, and by 1994 there were four women on the 13-person BBC Board of Management (1993, p.179). Overall then, there appear to be differing experiences amongst women. At the BBC, one-third of senior executives were women, as was documentary, drama and children's programming. However, there were only 17 per cent of women working in prominent positions in the light entertainment, sports and news sectors (1993, p.178).

The 1980s appear to have brought about major change in attitudes towards women within the television sector. Where previously management positions had a masculine stranglehold, these changes in attitudes potentially opened up opportunities for women. Arthurs (1994, p.93) discusses the equality initiatives implemented in television. The 1990 Broadcasting Act made it a requirement to promote equal opportunities, which would be monitored by the Independent Television Commission (ITC). This forced the BBC to examine their employment policies and their management structure, and together with a migration by male senior television executives to the newly-formed satellite broadcasting company BSB, with offers of massive pay increases, this left the field relatively open for women in terrestrial television.

By the end of the decade, deregulation was mostly complete through the efforts of the Peacock Committee in 1985 and the implementation of the Broadcasting Act in 1990. One of the consequences of deregulation was the opportunity for channels to introduce a range of home-grown and imported programming, which included an increase in reality-led shows such as *Kilroy* (BBC, 1986-2004), *The Time, The Place* (ITV, 1987-1998) and *Right To Reply* (C4, 1982-2001), alongside a growth of celebrity-focused media texts on television, in print and eventually online. As I have already identified, earlier reports and surveys have suggested that the number of women working in television in front of the camera (as opposed to secretarial work and production

assistants) appears to have grown in almost direct proportion to the number of new programmes introduced to the public.

It appears, then, that when both the BBC and ITV launched their breakfast programmes, the broadcast industry was in the process of significant change. The introduction of breakfast television, Channel 4, the growth of satellite and cable in 1989 with Sky and BSB in 1990 and the development of the independent broadcasting sector were all new developments which served to change the foundations of terrestrial broadcasting, and to some extent this included a change in the numbers of women either working in front of or behind the camera. The number of female television presenters appearing on screen had already begun to increase throughout the 1980s, and one of the first genres to include them as central hosts was breakfast television. I make the case that these presenters were the forerunners to the celebrity television presenters discussed by my research group. Their personal lives were intrinsically entangled with their professional on-screen personas, and they became public property in much the same way as the celebrities featured in *heat* magazine almost twenty years later.

## **Breakfast Television**

I suggest that the arrival of breakfast television in the UK in the 1980s was extremely significant in the development of the female presenter role. This was the beginning of a new era in broadcasting, and both terrestrial channels, ITV and BBC, invested in this new format. The competition for audiences was fierce, and from the outset the programmes were ratings-driven. Both channels adopted a friendly style of presentation with an emphasis on entertainment, using a male and female presenting team. The popularity of this team format with audiences had positive consequences for female journalists, as it gave them the opportunity to create an on-screen identity and become an essential part of the breakfast television format. The focus for the press was on the on-screen relationships between the male and female presenters, which led to an interest in the personal lives

of these presenters themselves. More established and serious journalists were derisory in their attitude towards breakfast television, commenting, for instance, in *The Spectator* newspaper, ‘there was no earthly reason why anyone of intelligence would watch it’ (Ingram, 1982)<sup>14</sup>, and it was this dismissal of the format by “serious” journalists that created the space for female journalists to develop their on-screen presence and careers.

Female presenters are now the mainstay of this format and have become central to the text – women such as Holly Willoughby, Lorraine Kelly, Fern Britton and Fiona Phillips are of interest to audiences across a range of media platforms such as lifestyle magazines, newspaper gossip columns and online communities. The advent of breakfast television is therefore a useful place to begin, as this format has been highly instrumental in the popularisation of female presenters on broadcast television today. These women have set the standard for the kinds of representations available for women in television. This genre in television programming also partly triggered the development and huge popularity of reality television formats, which I shall discuss later.

Jan Wieten and Mervi Pantti (2005), in their research on breakfast television in the USA, UK and Finland, identify a number of common generic elements and audience receptions to this format. It was, they suggest, one of the first ‘audience-tailored’ formats, meaning that it attempted to serve a wide range of audience needs for adults, children, men and women, which was achieved through programming segmentation and anchors. These anchors or presenters needed to be:

... fast-paced and relaxed at the same time so that the extremely fragmented nature of a morning show is concealed with a “flow.” This flow is achieved through a friendly and informal approach; (as being) all about friendly and interesting people having conversations with other friendly and interesting people, with the viewer invited to join them (2005, p.10).

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<sup>14</sup> BBC On This Day 1950-2005, 17<sup>th</sup> January.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/17/newsid\\_2530000/2530363.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/17/newsid_2530000/2530363.stm) (accessed January 2007).



The presenters were the communicators of this informal and friendly tone, and presenting teams that are enjoyed by audiences are crucial to a successful breakfast show. Wieten and Pantti (2005) offer Marcy McGinnis's, vice-president of news coverage at CBS, comment on NBC presenter Katie Couric: "She is not threatening, she is cute, she is not beautiful, and women like her, men like her" (2005, p.10).

Viewers' identification with television presenters is important for ratings. Therefore achieving the right balance of 'cute' but 'not beautiful', and also appealing equally to men and to women, is important to networks. For example, the pairing of Fern Britton and Phillip Schofield on *GMTV* (ITV) attracted six million viewers per week (Neil, 2009), and YouTube hits of this presenting couple reached over 94,000 in one day (Day, 2009). When Fern Britton left *GMTV*, viewers, online bloggers and newspaper columnists all felt the need to respond to her decision:

**BEVERLEY, YORKSHIRE SAID:**

I've really enjoyed the Fern & Phil partnership and it will be a hard act to follow. Fern is compassionate and well-informed when required and hilariously funny when she gets the giggles... cheers me up instantly. I applaud her for tackling her weight issues – despite being ostracised by those who felt it was no longer her private business but theirs. These very same people ridiculed her when she was overweight, even accusing her of being selfish. Whatever she decides to do I wish her good luck, time to enjoy her family and pursue other things.

March 26, 2009 9:02 AM

**D.TERRY SAID:**

Very saddened by the news, though I don't blame her. Why shouldn't she earn the same? The perfect TV partnership will be missed.

March 26, 2009 9:00 AM<sup>15</sup>

This article by *The Guardian* newspaper journalist Elizabeth Day states:

This Morning viewers felt that they knew her. They forgave her even when she admitted on air to having had a gastric band fitted in 2006, despite previously claiming her three-stone weight loss was due to exercise and healthy eating. They revelled in the camera-friendly banter between Britton and her co-host Phillip Schofield. A 10-minute YouTube video devoted

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<sup>15</sup><http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/we-love-telly/2009/03/farewell-fern-britton---who-wi.html> (accessed 10th August 2010).

entirely to their unscripted fits of giggles has attracted almost 80,000 hits. There is a “Fern and Phil Make Me Happy” group on the Facebook social networking site.<sup>16</sup>

This supports the idea that on-screen relationships are important to viewers – and therefore to the success of a programme. Wieten and Pantti suggest that the presenters ‘transmit the feeling of going through the same daybreak experience as the members of the audience’ (2005, p.14). It is the similarity in studio design and programme structure to everyday lives and homes that allows for a sense of familiarity between audience and presenters. The cosy living room set with coffee cups, the studio “window” onto the outside world and the friendly mode of address to both viewers and guests all contribute to a ‘taken for grantedness’ by audiences, and the programme becomes part of the fabric of their everyday lives. This therefore allows audiences the space to criticise and speculate on the presenters’ performance, private lives, appearance, etc. Quite significantly, this kind of speculation had fed the curiosity of my research group when discussing female presenters. It is the space created in the breakfast television format that has provided familiarity with the practice of speculation and involvement with the personal narratives of presenters.

To use Selina Scott as an example of how personal narratives are employed to attract audiences, in 1980 she became ITN’s second female newsreader, and almost immediately she was the subject of tabloid discussion. Scott’s looks were compared to Princess Diana, and she gained celebrity status through press coverage which specifically addressed her femininity: ‘A beautiful fair-haired girl called Selina Scott, with a way of fluffing her lines that made all the mums want to put their arms around her and **the men**’ (Darlow, 2004, p.319).

On 17<sup>th</sup> January 1983, BBC *Breakfast Time* was launched with Selina Scott as co-presenter. The BBC’s decision to use Scott as a co-presenter for their new audience-friendly breakfast show was

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<sup>16</sup> Day, E., 2009, The Observer profile: Fern Britton, cuddly queen of the breakfast sofa, *The Observer* (online) available at [www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/29/fern-britton-this-morning?](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/29/fern-britton-this-morning?) (accessed June 2009).

clearly based on her conventionally coded femininity and celebrity status. Her connection (if only in physical appearance) with Princess Diana brought her immediately into the public eye and her journalistic abilities were sidelined or ignored. The programme was innovative for the BBC in terms of technology and adopted an “American-style” relaxed and informal format. Initially, *Breakfast Time* brought in audiences of 1.5 million and the programme attempted to cater for:

A wide variety of tastes – with its own resident astrologer, Russell Grant, and a regular exercise slot led by “Green Goddess” Diana Moran. Families around the country got up especially early to watch the first programme. The BBC reported it received 1,500 calls from well-wishers phoning to offer their congratulations.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst *Breakfast Time* was producing daily news items and broadcast hourly news, it also introduced a style of broadcasting that focused on an informal and friendly mode of address, using sofas and “living room” sets with primary colours. The magazine-style format allowed the presenters to become “friends” with the viewers, and as a result audiences developed an interest in the performance of these presenters. In 1983, Scott’s intellect and abilities as a journalist were criticised when she interviewed Booker Prize judge Fay Weldon and asked Weldon if she actually read all the books she had to judge. Questions were raised in the press as to whether Scott was actually capable of conducting interviews, and her professionalism was immediately brought into focus. Criticism of Scott initially came from the industry’s male journalists; for example, the *Independent* journalist Paul McCann commented that this confirmed Scott’s ‘lowbrow reputation’:

For all the money she is reported to make, indeed perhaps because of it, Ms Scott has been dogged by suggestions that she is all looks and no substance. Her lowbrow reputation was set in 1983 when live on television she famously asked Fay Weldon, the chair of the Booker Prize jury, if she had actually read all the books being judged. A moment the BBC cruelly included in its TV Hell programme in 1992. Her image was not helped by a fawning interview she

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<sup>17</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/17/newsid\\_2530000/2530363.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/17/newsid_2530000/2530363.stm) (accessed June 2009)

conducted with the American property millionaire, Donald Trump, which prompted him later to write a letter describing her as “ingratiating” and “insecure” (McCann, 1997).

This appears to be a particularly judgemental comment and attacks Scott’s professionalism through the use of the highbrow/lowbrow discourse. This is a popular means of attack on women in broadcasting and serves to ridicule and limit expectations for them.



Fig. 1 Selina Scott

*Breakfast Time* was quickly followed by ITV’s *TV-am* on 1<sup>st</sup> February of the same year, hosted initially by Angela Rippon, Anna Ford, David Frost, Robert Kee and Michael Parkinson. Although both of these programmes may have begun with aspirations of delivering serious news to the nation, they quickly became popularised media texts. The shows celebrated domesticity through their living room replica sets that included sofas, flowers and coffee tables. Experienced journalists Anna Ford (ITN’s first female news presenter) and Angela Rippon (the face of BBC evening news for five years) quickly disappeared – and in fact were sacked by *TV-am* – when the programme failed to attract enough viewers to compete with the BBC’s offering in the same slot. They were replaced by television’s “husband and wife” presenters Anne Diamond and Nick Owen, female fitness instructor “Mad” Lizzie Webb, to compete with the “Green Goddess” on *Breakfast Time*, weather “girls” and cooking items executed by “female cooks,” before the advent of male celebrity

TV chefs. Bruce Gyngell, chief executive of *TV-am*, appointed his secretary, Ulrika Jonsson, as the station's weather girl, 'to inject some cheer into forecasts. Viewers felt they joined a surrogate family, with Anne Diamond playing the fresh-faced but smart girl from next door' (*The Guardian* 9<sup>th</sup> September 2000).

As discussed earlier, definitions of the terms, "newscaster", "newsreader" and "presenter" seem to vary. Generally, a "newscaster" refers to a person who is a working journalist, someone who participates in the construction of the news they are delivering and is responsible for the content of the words they speak, which is an important differentiation. The term "presenter" is a more contemporary term used to describe males and females who present the news and/or entertainment shows. The term became more popular throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which seems to correlate with the introduction of breakfast television as well as to the increase in female broadcasters.

For my research, breakfast television is a significant place where women became highly visible (at *TV-am*, 70% of the staff were women and the average age was 29)<sup>18</sup>, which is the legacy for female presenters today. The women in breakfast television were referred to as "presenters," their professionalism as broadcasters sidelined and their personalities foregrounded. These images of women on television were well-established when my focus group became aware of media representations of females, and their discussions on the subject were based around their assumptions that women in broadcasting are usually found in entertainment programmes and that their personal lives are part of their media persona. Having television presenters from the 1990s as a background to their lives would account for their reluctance to take women in broadcasting too seriously.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.80sactual.com/2009/01/1983-tv-am-and-breakfast-time-breakfast.html> (accessed January 2009)



Fig. 2 Anne Diamond

The BFI's published account (Day-Lewis, 1989), *One Day in the Life of Television*, recorded the diaries of audiences watching television over one day, and it is clear from this account that audience responses to women in television focused on the personal and informal rather than the professional. Here, *TV-am*'s breakfast television presenter Anne Diamond arouses emotional responses from viewers:

Always watch *TV-am*. Not so keen on Anne Diamond flaunting her pregnancy, even though she's not married...  
Gillian McMonagle, housewife and mother, Halifax.

Anne Diamond isn't wearing anything particularly awful this morning...  
Elizabeth McFarlane, Guidance Officer, Glasgow.

My husband said: "Have they sacked that daft woman yet?" He meant Anne Diamond.  
Pam Malkin, Astrologer and Clairvoyant, Maften, Northumberland.  
(Day-Lewis 1989, p.23).

Whilst this presenter was criticised in terms of appearance, morals and capability, it may be the context of breakfast television that somehow gives audiences "licence" to criticise. However, this format is the most accessible for women who want to work in television, and therefore to some

extent their career options are limited. The diaries of these participants comment freely on the assumption that breakfast television was a trivial and not especially informative format:

I wonder about Diamond and Morris, they somehow come across as rather dim...  
Judith Taylor, housewife, Stockport.  
(Day-Lewis 1998, p.26).

I use breakfast television mostly as a clock to tell me when to leave for work and as background noise...  
Alex White, Journalist, London W2 (Day Lewis, 1989, p.27).

The trivialisation of the format by viewers therefore forms the backdrop from which female television presenters and newsreaders are read and understood by audiences. *TV-am* presenter Anne Diamond said of her time on the show:

Most of the letters I got in my heyday would be about the earrings you were wearing rather than how you tackled Arthur Scargill. Someone sent in a picture they had on top of their TV of me with a flowerpot on my head. That's how people see you – as humdrum a piece of furniture on their sideboard. I've still got it. It reminds me of my place in society (Husband, 2009).

It appears, then, that the pleasure in viewing for audiences emerges from an engagement with the television relationships and gendered identities created on screen. Audiences, particularly in the case of female presenters, like to scrutinise their physical and emotional state. Also, these women have to fulfil a strictly limited set of expectations, in that they have to be attractive but not *too* attractive (Kate Couric), (not) morally respectable (Anne Diamond, pregnant and unmarried became a “problem”) and not too intelligent (Anne Diamond). The kinds of judgements and criticisms made by audiences and by the national press appear to conflate two factors, namely being a female broadcaster and “trivial” television programmes. My focus group was clear in its judgement of female presenters, as they were critical of presenters who were involved in “serious shows,” by which they referred to women presenters who interviewed politicians or people they regarded as intellectual. This criticism could stem from unfamiliarity with the concept, as women presenters are

usually hosts of light entertainment and their experience of women in broadcasting has been limited, which may have informed their critical understanding.

### **The feminisation and commercialisation of broadcast television**

Liesbet Van Zoonen (1998, p. 32) discusses the findings of a survey of women journalists carried out in the 1980s, which is of real interest here, as she examines the concept of the feminisation of the news. It appears that women journalists led the way in television, and their frequent appearances in the news genre opened the door for more women in other genres such as reality shows and light entertainment. The tabloidisation of the news and the focus on news as entertainment have been attributed mostly to the rise of women journalists. Women journalists in the survey revealed that there did appear to be a gendered approach toward news stories, and they felt their male counterparts had an 'over-fetishization of facts' (1998, p.35) and were not focusing on the causes and impacts of events. She also found that women felt they were more in tune with audience needs than men, and therefore they could work more comfortably in reporting for a wider audience. So, in some respects, these women thought that they were more competent and would provide a wider perspective; however, the male perspective was that the quality of work produced is compromised because of this gendered approach.

Van Zoonen cites Colin Sparks' (1991) work in this area, and he suggests that changes in the industry have made journalism for women more accessible, due mostly to the shift in content from news to entertainment and specialised interest magazines. He suggests that this has led to some feminisation of journalism, as the magazine industry is more accessible for women journalists.



In Bob Franklin's (1997) assessment of news media<sup>19</sup> he suggests that from the late 1980s the trend for "softer" or "lighter" news stories developed. This development was due partly to the changing market, deregulation as discussed earlier and the growing demand to win viewers and readers, which led to a style of reportage offering news as "infotainment." Franklin suggests that:

Newszak understands news as a product designed and "processed" for a particular market and delivered in increasingly homogenous "snippets" which make only modest demands on the audience (1997, p.4).

The commodification of news reporting developed a style of journalism led by market-driven stories and the development of 'more bite size McNugget journalism'<sup>20</sup> (1997, p.5). Franklin asserts that this type of journalism became popular at the expense of serious analytical reporting. News stories had to be profitable and audience ratings became the prime determinant for news values, while current affairs programmes also became subject to scrutiny in terms of audience appeal; for example, ITV announced plans to 'revamp its current-affairs programmes to attract a younger audience' (1997, p.11). When Channel 5 launched in 1995, it aimed to prevent news 'from being painful by offering less politics and more consumer, sport and entertainment news' (1997, p.11). Changes in regulation policies and cultural shifts made it easier for women in television to secure a more prominent role in front of the camera. Factors such as audience appeal, the need to attract a younger audience and the development of infotainment programming complemented the stereotyped image of femininity, and feminine qualities such as empathy, sensitivity and mediating skills, together with a feminine appearance, were the perfect combination.

Franklin uses *News at Ten* as an example of the more obvious shift in style of news coverage and reporting. In 1992, the programme was "revamped" to include 'apocalyptic theme tunes, remarkable graphics and virtual reality backdrops, which seem more appropriate to entertainment

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<sup>19</sup> Franklin prefers to use the term "newszak" rather than tabloid journalism, citing Malcolm Muggeridge as the originator of the term (1997, p.4).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Marr's criticism of *The Guardian* newspaper, cited in B. Franklin (1997), *Newszak* and *News Media*, p. 5.

than news programmes' (1997, p.254). News stories were reported from a human interest perspective, and Franklin points to a 'cultivation of star journalists and celebrity presenters' (note that the term "presenter" is now used more than "news reporter," "newscaster" or "newsreader"). Whilst there is no one single definition of these terms, "presenter" connotes a less serious impression than "newscaster." As noted above, the inference is that presenters read the stories and are not the creators thereof. Franklin suggests that where presenters are male and female there has to be some sexual chemistry, as it is believed to be important for audience ratings. He also comments on the common use of the 'two-way exchanges' (1997, p.256) between journalists, suggesting that this could have evolved through an economic imperative whereby costs are kept down when two journalists exchange views on the stories. However, it also serves to entertain audiences and personalise the news through familiarity. My research group is most familiar with this type of journalism and presenter-led broadcasting. The personalisation of news events through the presenter rather than the content of the story may serve to clarify why my research suggests that teenage girls are unwilling to believe in the credibility of female presenters when they are hosting programmes with a serious content.

The Broadcasting Act (1990) stipulated that all broadcasters had to source 25% of their production output from independent production companies. Against this political, cultural and economic backdrop came the potential and opportunity for more women to work within the industry. Broadcasters were in a state of upheaval, and they needed to provide competitive entertainment and prove that they were viable within the new market model. Clearly, cheap and easy to produce programmes became a favourable option for broadcasters, who became market-orientated and ratings-driven.

## **Women in front of the camera – television presenters**

As already noted, female news reporters and broadcasters have been present on our screens for much longer than celebrity presenters. By celebrity presenters I refer to those who have made their career in television not through journalism but through completing media training, such as presenting courses, and who eventually host primetime programmes via an apprenticeship in late-night television, for example Davina McCall. Presenters with this background are not necessarily journalists and have been through media training with the specific intention of working in television as a presenter in light entertainment, such as reality formats, quiz shows and primetime viewing. Female journalists, I would argue, have traded with a completely different currency than their presenter counterparts, who are the prime focus of the study herein. Whilst there is an established and proven gender imbalance in opportunities for female news journalists, I suggest that there exists some (if not full) acknowledgement of their professional qualifications in “serious” journalism.

Women presenters, however, tend to occupy a trivial and feminised television space, which is where they are seen by young girls. This appears to be a limited and heavily monitored space in which women can exist, and any attempt to move out is difficult and can lead to criticism by broadcasters and the press. Women who work in television come to recognise these boundaries, and it is this space that teenage female audiences experience.

In 2005, a report by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) found that 35% of presenters globally were female and 37% were female news reporters. Females were featured as experts 17% of the time, while 86% of all spokespeople in the media were male<sup>21</sup>. These figures highlight the imbalance between males and females in terms of time on screen and the limited representation of

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<sup>21</sup> Gallagher, M., 2005, Who Makes the News? (pdf) available at [http://www.whomakesthenews.org/images/stories/website/gmmp\\_reports/2005/gmmp-report-en-2005.pdf](http://www.whomakesthenews.org/images/stories/website/gmmp_reports/2005/gmmp-report-en-2005.pdf) (accessed February 2009).

available females. An article in *Broadcast* magazine (Edwards, 2000) discussed the results of their research on the number of times television presenters were seen by an average viewer in one week. Of the top 25 presenters, 12 were female and only six of those presented programmes on their own. Nick Robinson, a BBC broadcast journalist, in a recent discussion about his career and the state of BBC journalism was asked by an audience member why he thought there were so few women on the BBC broadcast news team.<sup>22</sup> The question was applauded by some audience members and derided by others. As an audience member myself, I heard the man sat beside me remark ‘what a pathetic question’. This is in some way indicative of the ways in which the under-representation of women is considered to be irrelevant and unworthy of discussion. The question was acknowledged by Nick Robinson as a genuine concern and he could not give an answer for the lack of women in broadcast news, but he did point out that there were a number of younger, early career women he assumed would become prominent. This assumption is often made because there are a rising number of women working within television. However, as noted earlier, *Media Parents* is set up to allow women in television to continue with their career, which is an organisation outside of the BBC and other channels. This move was made because the opportunities to progress as women with families do not usually present themselves within the confines of the organisation.

Before I began this research I had made the assumption that television programmes of all genres were populated predominantly by males. This supposition was made without any real statistical analysis and was mostly a perception based on my experience as a viewer. I was interested to discover that the GMMP research confirmed my supposition and that 86% of the time spokespeople in the media are male. This suggests that young girls are viewing and listening to males more than they are females, which may have consequences for the way in which they respond to women in the media. This figure suggests that a female presenter hosting a television show is less

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<sup>22</sup> Robinson, N., Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2013, ‘Nick Robinson The Inside Story’, Interviewed by Peter Florence, *The Telegraph* Hay Festival 23<sup>rd</sup> May-2<sup>nd</sup> June 2013.

conventional than a male presenter. I am aware that young girls are keen watchers of female presenters and I have considered how often they have opportunities to see women presenting television shows. If the opportunities are limited, then it is important to consider the kinds of shows the women present and also to establish if they are lone presenters or co-present with another female or male. It is possible that the range of representations of women on television for teenage girls impacts on their understanding of femininity and to some extent their own subjectivity. Making some overarching assumptions to explain my position, Davina McCall has been identified over the years by almost every young girl I have spoken to about television presenters, and she is mostly known for her time as the sole presenter of *Big Brother* (C4, Endemol). McCall is usually discussed in a positive light, with few criticisms of her presenting skills. By comparison, Holly Willoughby has co-presented shows, usually with male presenters. The research group tended to describe her negatively and with some derision, with the focus of their conversation on the shows she presents with males. Perhaps her association with a male presenter influenced the group whilst they were less derisory about McCall. Fearne Cotton has presented shows with Willoughby, a partnership which is regarded favourably by the group, thus suggesting that teenage audiences are influenced by these factors and prefer women to work alone or with other women. I carried out an analysis of television scheduling for one week so that I could analyse the range of programmes women were presenting. The types of programmes women appear in are of interest, as they have the potential to create stereotypes around their compatibility with particular shows. I can also use the information from this analysis to examine if the types of shows and the role of the presenter (sole or co-presenter) can be mapped across my research groups' responses to these women.

I analysed the schedules for BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, C4 and C5 in the week commencing October 17th 2009 (details in Appendix A). On the surface, the ratio of male and female presenters looked unequally balanced with a predominance of males, with the exception of C5 where there were

predominantly females. Also, when I compared the types of shows hosted solely by women, the picture was even less balanced, and the majority of shows they appeared in used a feminised text. Feminised texts use stereotypical ideas of femininity as the core ideas driving the programme, which can usually be identified as gossip-driven, tackling issues of domesticity and relationships (usually heterosexual). The shows hosted by female presenters were: *The Weakest Link*, with host Anne Robinson (BBC1, 2000-2012), the all-female presenting team on *Loose Women* (ITV1999-), *Trisha*, hosted by Trisha Goddard (C5, 2005-2010), and *How Clean is Your House?* with Aggie MacKenzie and Kim Woodburn (C4, *Talkback TV*, 2003-2009). The documentaries were: *Mail Order Bride*, hosted by Dawn Porter (C4, 2008), and Louise Redknapp presenting the reality show *The Farmer Wants a Wife* (C5, 2009).

*The Weakest Link*, hosted by Anne Robinson, involved Robinson acting as quizmaster with a style of presenting the show that gave her the titles ‘TV’s Queen of Mean’ and the ‘rudest woman on television’.<sup>23</sup> This focus on Robinson’s aggressive style led to much debate about her lack of femininity, and she was referred to in terms of her sexual appeal as a dominatrix. Any references to Robinson’s intellectual prowess, her career as a journalist and her success as the host of a primetime show were secondary to her sexualisation. *Loose Women* is an all-female panel show where the presenters tackle issues of the day taken from both news stories and audience surveys. The focus of the show is usually on relationships, marriage and children, and occasionally the panel members discuss politicians and political issues. Their guests are television celebrities and actors from soap operas, and the tone of the show is conversational, informal and entertaining in its intention. This show’s female hosts steer discussions away from the informed and factual towards those that are anecdotal and humorous, and in this way the show appears to remain “personal” with regards to the opinions the presenters hold, and yet it also lacks authority and gravitas. On several occasions I

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<sup>23</sup> Pearson, A., 2001, ‘The Devil in Mrs Robinson’, *The Telegraph* online available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/3292473/The-devil-in-Mrs-Robinson.html> (accessed January 2013).

have taken a number of student groups to be part of the audience for this show, in order to demonstrate the television studio setup and the job roles of the studio crew. The focus group members would have been present at one of these visits and would have been able to see the presenting team in action. The topics for conversations on the visits I have made have been: infidelity, child behaviour and parenting, marriage and relationships. These areas are stereotypically seen as the responsibility of women, and therefore to make these the focus of television discussion reinforces these stereotypes for both male and female students in the audience.

*Trisha* is a reality show about relationships between families and partners. The host of the show, Trisha Goddard, listens to problems raised by members of the public who have been invited to discuss their personal life on air; the focus of this show is to explore relationship problems. I have also taken my students to watch the filming of this show, and on the occasion of our visit the guests on the show were a husband who was a gambling addict and had endangered the life of his wife and child, a man who had been unfaithful to his partner and two women who had become enemies because of their relationship with the same man. In all these instances the females were the victims, and they had “volunteered” to become part of the show. Trisha acts as the relationship “counsellor,” and once more the onus to resolve the situations becomes the responsibility of the female host and the female guests who have initiated the appearances on the show.

*How Clean is Your House?* is hosted by two female presenters who inspect the houses of people who ask for help because they are unable to keep their house in an acceptable state of order and hygiene. Aggie MacKenzie and Kim Woodburn as the show’s hosts carry out inspections of these houses and then set about cleaning and passing out useful tips as they go. This show works on the stereotype that all women are motivated by domesticity and will be interested in not only the cleanliness of their own home but also that of other people’s homes. The female hosts are older women (MacKenzie aged 57 and Woodburn aged 71) and it is unusual to see representations of

older women on screen as discussed earlier. Jermyn (2013) provides an account of the absence and presence of older women on television. Jermyn suggests that women remain under represented on television and identifies research that claims that “only four in every 10 women on screen are aged over 40” (2013, p.76). The unusual pairing of two women aged 57 and 71 is completely in keeping with traditional ideas of women as domestic experts and therefore does little to extend the range of representations of women on screen.

*Mail Order Bride* hosted by Dawn Porter is a show where the host travels to the Ukraine to investigate the fact that over 4,000 men find brides through the mail order bride industry. Porter also talks to the women involved to ascertain how this service impacts on their lives. This documentary is different in tone and intent to the other shows hosted by women in as much as it tackles a serious subject with some gravitas and integrity. It does however choose an aspect of life that represents women as passive and reliant on males as “buyers” of their services as potential brides.

*The Farmer Wants a Wife*, hosted by Louise Redknapp, focuses on finding partners for lonely male farmers. The subject matter is clearly stereotypically female in content and in an interview with Redknapp about this show<sup>24</sup> she is identified as the wife of footballer Jamie Redknapp almost immediately. This representation, where Redknapp is primarily a wife helping other people find a wife, is yet another indication of the way that media images of women are contained within the domestic, feminine and emotional frame of reference.

Where male presenters were co-hosts of a programme for example, *Location Location* (C4, RDF Media, 2000-) and *Homes Under the Hammer* (BBC1 2003- ) the shows are not stereotypically feminine in content. The target audience for these two property shows would be men and women

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<sup>24</sup> Anon., 2008, *Interview Extra, Louise Redknapp*, TV Choice online available at <http://www.tvchoicemagazine.co.uk/interviewextra/louise-redknapp-farmer-wants-wife> (accessed September 2008).



and the shows are focused on how to increase the profit of a property, making it more saleable. In shows with sole male presenters, the genre and subject matter were typically more masculine, for example, *Fighter Jets* (documentary C5 2009), *WW1 in Colour* (C5, 2003-), *Coast* (BBC1 2005-), *Daily Politics* (BBC, 2003-), *Working Lunch* (BBC1, 1994-2010), and *Master Chef* (BBC1, 1990-). Clearly, there appears to be a gendered programming agenda. In those programmes hosted and presented by males, the emphasis is on politics, environment, finance and history. The programmes hosted solely by female presenters are more feminised texts such as quiz shows, female focused magazine format shows, and shows offering domestic advice on lifestyles. These programmes can be identified as feminised because of the context in which the narrative unfolds, the subject being addressed and the way the text positions the audience. The two documentary series, *Mail Order Bride*, presented by Dawn Porter and *The Farmer Wants a Wife* presented by Louise Redknapp, focus on the domestic and emotional stories of interpersonal conflict around love and relationships. These are traditionally feminine areas of concern and would be aimed at a predominantly female audience. This analysis of television scheduling begins to construct a picture of the television landscape and the kinds of representation of women on television. Teenage girls are the ideal audience for these programmes as Dawn Porter is a television presenter and also married to an actor and Louise Redknapp is known to the teenage audience as ex-member of a girl band, and a WAG (Wives and Girlfriends of sporting celebrities). Both of these women appear in celebrity magazines and newspapers not only for their own fame but also for their husband's therefore further extending their fame and credibility.

It appears that audiences and producers expect female presenters to deliver typically feminine programmes. This is made apparent when the first women to become sports presenters made headline news, therefore highlighting the expectations broadcast channels have for women in the media. *The Daily Mail* refers to Jacqui Oatley, the first female presenter of a football programme,

*Match of the Day* (BBC, 1964- ) in April 2007 as, “Sporting beauty Jacqui Oatley ... Jacqui with her highlighted blonde hair and tailored black trouser suits, certainly did not fit the image” (Day, 2007).

Also in 2000 television presenter, Mariella Frostrup, was invited to present one episode of *Panorama* (BBC, 1953- ), the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme. The subject of the programme was an analysis of the reality television format and this caused much criticism. The accusations were that Frostrup was not qualified to present the show with one senior broadcaster at ITV referring to her as ‘blonde totty’ (Smith, 2000). Lorraine Heggessey, then-controller of BBC1, said Frostrup would not be appropriate because she did not have ‘serious journalistic credentials’ (Wells, 2000). Frostrup was presumably invited to present a show on reality television, as she is usually involved in “softer” subjects as a journalist, a television genre which is understood as a feminised text, possessing conventionally feminine content. The lack of fit between *Panorama*, a serious investigative current affairs show, a trivial genre such as reality television and Frostrup’s professional reputation as a lowbrow journalist caused disparagement amongst industry insiders. The implication here is that Frostrup’s presence would undermine the credibility of *Panorama* and its coverage of the reality television genre. Clearly there is very little attempt by broadcasters to offer women in television a broad spectrum of programmes, and so these women find themselves working within very limited arenas, namely domestic, “trivial” or less “important” celebrity-driven programmes.

These findings are of great research interest, because they contextualise the conversations I have had with teenage girls. Whilst girls are engaged to some extent by the narratives around female presenters in media texts such as *Big Brother* (C4 Endemol 2000-2010) and *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC1, 2004-), they are less convinced of the professional capabilities of women in the media to cover “more important” television programming. A charity benefit for Nelson Mandela’s birthday, in June 2008 in Hyde Park, was given as an example by my research group. This was hosted by Phillip Schofield and Fearne Cotton, and whilst Phillip Schofield was considered acceptable, Fearne

Cotton was considered too trivial for the job. On reflection, female presenters are offered a fairly limited number of genres, which may have some influence on the way teenage girls view their capacity to exhibit “serious” presenting skills. In fact, the anxiety and derision displayed by the girls in the focus group about presenters who they felt were “out of place” was clearly significant. The strength of feeling towards these presenters, both positive and negative, is clear evidence of how much they matter. I will return to this phenomenon in Chapter 5.

## **The influence of reality television**

For this research, reality television is an important genre for the focus group, as it a popular choice of viewing and a rich source of information for young girls. One presenter identified by the focus group established herself and her career in reality television. Davina McCall was the sole presenter of *Big Brother* (Endemol) from its first broadcast on Channel 4 in 2000 to its last broadcast on that channel in 2010. (I will return to McCall’s career in more detail later in Chapter 3). Reality television arguably had its generic roots in breakfast television as well as other more established formats such as documentary, in particular observational documentary. In the breakfast television genre the on-screen relationships between presenters became a part of the fabric of the shows. Anne Diamond and Nick Owen (*TV-am*) developed an on-screen “husband and wife” relationship, best described by Van Zoonen as:

“Ken and Barbie” journalism where attractiveness is more important than professionalism and the anchor team engage in “happy talk” in order to “people-ize” the news and suggest a happy family environment (1998, p. 40).

*TV-am* invited guests onto the show and essentially steered breakfast news away from a “hard” news approach in their reporting and began to deliver “soft” news. This included celebrity entertainment and showbiz gossip, which developed the audience’s interest in the advice the programme’s “experts” were presenting. For example, items on health problems, gardening and

home improvement were the forerunners to the plethora of reality shows that followed on primetime television. These items on improvement, either self-improvement or home improvement, signposted the advent of television's 'narrative of transformation' (Brunsdon, 2001, p.54), which is where audiences switched on to watch the narratives developing between presenters, taking on board the advice given by them and developing their own personal improvement narratives and strategies. The reality television genre was created and developed within this environment. By the time this genre had become popular, audiences were already familiar with the notion of self- transformation. We were encouraged to extend and deepen our involvement with programmes through participating in reality shows, either as a contestant or as an interactive voting audience. Audiences were clearly ready for this innovation, as breakfast television had already primed us to transfer our attention seamlessly to this format through its invitation to ask advice from its presenter professionals, e.g. doctors, fitness coaches, life coaches, cooks, etc. The notion of self-improvement is very relevant for my research group, as their lives are punctuated by the imperative in magazines and television shows to monitor and perform continuous self-improvement assessments. Their conversations are often focused on celebrities or friends who advocate self-improvement. When designing my questionnaire around the top ten female presenters, I found the most effective method was to provide a magazine-style questionnaire, as it fitted best with their existing practice of assessing and checking. Respondents found the task comfortable, as they had had a good deal of practise assessing either themselves or celebrities in magazines.

More opportunities for women working in television came about when Commissioning Editors for Channel 4 were anxious to create a more original approach to broadcasting and were looking for 'alternative faces... with non-standard accents'. They preferred to use unknowns rather than star performers in the hope of attracting an audience 'younger and better educated than the audience at large' (Tunstall, 1993, p.179). From the 1990s, all broadcasters became accustomed to working in a

highly competitive and commercially-driven market. With the growth of satellite provision, audiences had begun to fragment, and as a consequence of this diversification, the costs of production were driven down and competition for audiences became the prime motivation. Richard Kilborn (2003) makes the observation that, at this point, all television genres had to some extent been commodified: '[T]hey have to earn the right to be there' (2003, p.9) and compete with other genres and subgenres.

In this environment, reality television flourished, as it emphasises the personal and the individual. It also used younger, unknown presenters and was successful in attracting a younger audience. The format produced debates around the “dumbing down” of television in a similar way to the journalists’ responses to breakfast television discussed earlier. This may be due in part to the democratisation of broadcasting and the opportunities for ordinary members of the public to get involved in decision making through phone and online voting. Criticism of the genre predominantly came from male journalists, who were sceptical of the cultural value of this kind of democracy. The media critic Charlie Brooker comments on television’s popular programming: ‘Intellectual nourishment of all kinds is nudged embarrassingly to the sidelines in the blinkered quest for ratings’ (in Kilborn, 2003, p.26; Brooker, 2001, p.52). Furthermore, *The Guardian* journalist Jonathon Glancy comments:

The relentless dumbing down of British culture is debasing the notion of excellence. Good intelligent work still emerges, but bogus, “democratic” values are threatening to drown us in dross (in Kilborn, 2003, p.49; Glancy, 1998).

It is this lack of regard by male presenters for reality formats and other entertainment shows that really opened up opportunities for women. This is now becoming a familiar pattern. The response to deregulation by male journalists in the media in the early part of the 1990s was to migrate to satellite television (for higher salaries and more prestige, as discussed earlier in this chapter). The early reality television shows were mostly presented by women for the same reasons.

Annette Hill offers an assessment of the popularity of the genre:

Viewers watch BB for many reasons – it’s something new, you can vote people you don’t like off the show – but perhaps the most striking reasons for watching BB are that everybody else is watching and talking about it, and everybody else is forming judgments on the contestants and how they act up for the cameras. The focus on the degree of actuality, on real people’s improvised performances in the program, leads to a particular viewing practice: audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are “really” themselves in an unreal environment. This, I argue, is the popularity of the gamedoc (Hill, 2002, p.323).

This notion of authenticity is of relevance for my fieldwork findings. Members of the research group measured the presenters against notions of “real” and “fake” representations, and they also appeared to bond over this issue, as it was clearly a pleasurable experience to assess, check and measure presenters against these criteria. This kind of assessment, in my experience, only happens with female presenters – it is a purely gendered response to women in the media. It is difficult to assess whether this response would have existed if more women presenters had been involved in more “serious” programming, though an examination of the gender of presenters for *Big Brother* series 1 worldwide reveals a predominance of female presenters.<sup>25</sup>

The UK’s *Big Brother* began its first show on Channel 4 in 2000 with audiences of 3 million, rising to a market share of 46% after the first week of broadcast. At its peak in the first series, *Big Brother*’s audience share was 56% and averaged 26% (Hill, 2002, p.326). Hill identifies the developments that led to the predominance of reality programmes on television and positions the rise of tabloid journalism at the centre. Hill suggests that, in fact, the success of these publications in creating a tabloid audience contributed in part to the development and rise of the reality television format. In turn, both mediums began to include in their coverage stories about *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and other reality shows, thus creating an almost hermetic and interdependent relationship for all involved. Television audiences then turned to newspapers for more information about reality “stars,” and

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<sup>25</sup> Of the 124 presenters worldwide (43 countries in total), I found that 56 were male and 67 female.  
[http://uk.ask.com/wiki/Big\\_Brother\\_%28TV\\_series%29](http://uk.ask.com/wiki/Big_Brother_%28TV_series%29) (accessed April 2013).

newspapers and magazines began to invest heavily in covering human interest stories around celebrities. Audiences then turned back to television to see these stories develop live on screen. Access to information across platforms has developed today to include online and mobile communities, and it is now possible to follow celebrities on *Twitter*, for example, as well as visit their own websites to complete a 360 degree investigation of celebrity lives.

This access to information about women on television has a significant impact on teenage girls and may account for the ways in which they get attached to female presenters as if they were “friends.” For these women, the boundaries between real and professional personas are very blurred. Whilst teenage audiences are aware of the distance between themselves and these women, they are also privileged with access to more information than any other generation of teenage audiences. It is not surprising, then, that audiences form attachments to media images of women.

*Big Brother* in the UK developed a mutually beneficial relationship with *Heat* magazine. When Emap first launched *heat* in 1999, it initially failed to meet its target sales. Editor Mark Firth’s target audience was ‘18-34, urban, upmarket and intelligent – a social butterfly who loves pubbing, clubbing and eating out’ (Holmes, 2001, p.23). Firth took the magazine in a new direction by creating a “celebrity magazine” and inviting Davina McCall, presenter of *Big Brother*, to become its first star columnist. *heat* doubled its circulation, reaching 200,000 per week in 2001, after struggling to meet its initial targets of 50,000 in its first year. *Heat* often dedicated feature pages to *Big Brother* as well as *Big Brother* souvenir issues. Holmes’ assessment of the role of the magazine in forming narratives around celebrity suggests that it provides the ‘authoritative cultural perspective on celebrity’ (2001, p. 21). Furthermore, the magazine is referenced in many other texts and places celebrity narratives into everyday life. Holmes suggests that television is the main site for the development of celebrity culture, and it is this symbiotic relationship with print that has contributed to our democratic approach toward the famous. Popular attitudes towards fame and celebrity have,

at their core, an understanding that in order for celebrities to be successful for audiences, they have to be authentic. Both *Heat* and reality television constantly search for signs of authenticity, and it is this ubiquitous narrative to which audiences respond, as it ‘offers the audience a flattering position of power’ (Gamson, cited in Holmes, 2001, p.125).

Lury (1999) also examines the reception of television presenters by audiences and the performances of these presenters. She suggests that presenters exemplify contractions:

... at once knowing friendly, open and polished, they include and charm their audience. They welcome the viewer in pretty much with open arms, particularly in the context of daytime magazine or breakfast shows where they are obliged to reveal more than their news associates, so that sometimes all of their body is on display and available to the viewer. Very often this can mean that the female presenter’s body – like Lorraine Kelly’s, Oprah Winfrey’s or Rikki Lake’s – feature as an important locus for some aspects of their discussion, and act as the basis of their authenticity and connection to their viewers (1999, p.114).

The notion that these presenters reveal more of their bodies than broadcast news presenters is an interesting proposition. Audiences are more connected to these presenters through the informality of their speech and body language and have visual access to their bodies in ways that were not usually available before the advent of the breakfast and daytime television formats. This may contribute to audiences’ understanding of the accessibility of female presenters, and the performance these women give as ordinary “just like us” adds to this understanding. Lury explains that the contradiction occurs within this performance when the presenter ‘produces a skilful performance that is defined by control (hence in part the “cover up” which covers gaps, drops in pace, or weak performances from guests)’ (1999, p.115). This has clear resonance for my research group findings, as through their conversations the girls were wary of any presenters’ authenticity. I suggest that group can to some extent distinguish between performance and real inasmuch as they make reference to their suspicion of “fakeness” throughout the transcripts. They do not, however, appear to talk about the need for the presenters to give a performance as part of their job. In fact, very little reference is ever made about the remit of a television presenter in terms of skill, training



and success, which is notable and contributes to the idea that the female presenters identified by the research group are often seen as part of the background for television programmes and not as the focus of the show.

Knowledge of the lives of presenters is created and maintained by cross-platform media texts allowing audiences to have access (if they choose) to information about the minutiae of their daily routines. This information is often microscopic in terms of detail about, for example, where a presenter shops, where they eat, who they see throughout their day, the intimate details of their personal relationships or illness or a child's illness. The information is nevertheless managed and controlled by a number of factors, including the presenter, the presenter's agent, the deal struck with the supporting medium featuring their stories and the appetite of the audiences. Therefore, access to the "real" for audiences is limited and dependent on the willingness of the presenter to reveal themselves to audiences. During my fieldwork, I noticed that members of the research group checked and assessed presenters for signs of realism and authenticity and had a clear understanding of the imperative by these women to sell themselves and maintain public interest. This in itself was not an issue for criticism by the research group – what was an issue was the balance of authenticity and inauthenticity. The research group appreciated the honesty of presenters who acknowledged the intelligence of their audience. Most notably the group identified Katie Price as not only the most authentic and respectful of her audience, but also as a television presenter, even though she has not had a presenting role. At the time of carrying out the research, Price's reality television show, *Katie and Peter: The Next Chapter* (ITV2, 2007), was being aired. The group included Price in their list of the top ten presenters they wanted to discuss. I did not question their reasoning, as I had given them the parameters of the research and they chose to include Katie Price. On reflection, if I had questioned their logic at this point, I may have been able to add this to my findings. However, at the time the decision appeared unanimous and it was clear they were happy and looking forward to discussing this television celebrity.

For the purposes of this research, I had tried to make a clear distinction between the terms “celebrity” and “presenter,” as I felt they were very different roles. I had considered that presenters were more ordinary and more “like us,” and the discussions the young girls had about television presenters were different to those about celebrities. On the whole I have managed to keep this distinction intact. However, the boundaries became blurred when the group chose Katie Price. I had defined a celebrity as a woman who had become famous in the media for any number of reasons, for example a reality television contestant, an actress with a high media profile for her lifestyle and not her career, a footballer’s wife or an independently wealthy media figure. These people seek media attention through their agents and work to present a particular lifestyle. A television presenter may attract significant media attention, but their primary narrative is through their career as a presenter – they may well be able to demand a high salary and therefore maintain a publicly glamorous lifestyle, but they are still contracted to an employer. This does, I suggest, make them more ordinary, and it is this “ordinariness” that attracts teenage girls. The television presenters are also often celebrated for their ability to “care” for their families and also manage a career, and they are often portrayed in media texts as “just like us.” Biressi and Nunn (2008) examine this notion of ordinary and celebrity in their work on reality TV. Drawing on Langer’s notion of ‘the especially remarkable’, they suggest that a celebrity status gives an individual ‘a privileged authority’ (2008, p.152). The authors discuss the notion of ‘ordinary people rendered remarkable’, by making reference to the way that celebrity reality TV is able to attract audiences, as it creates ordinariness as a performance within celebrity culture:

Phil Edgar-Jones, the executive producer of *Big Brother*, described the second *Celebrity Big Brother* as a stripping away of celebrity personas: “With normal people we are making ordinary people extraordinary. With this we are making famous people very, very ordinary.” In short, reality TV is celebrated as a democratisation of public culture and the deconstruction of the components of fame that partially constitute the celebrity media subject and the construction of social identity more broadly (Biressi and Nunn, 2008, p.44).

The focus group members were very familiar with celebrity reality TV and attracted to the notion that they were ‘ordinary people just like us’. They engaged to a degree with the notion that a display of ordinariness by celebrities allows for audiences to reflect on this ordinariness and perhaps grow fonder of the celebrity as a result. The group were, however, mindful that this display of ordinariness is often just that – a display – and they also acknowledged the celebrity’s desire to remain both famous and ordinary in the right balance. Biressi and Nunn (2008, p. 152) suggest that ‘the calculus of celebrity, then, is flexible’ inasmuch as media publicity can create celebrities out of ordinary people. For the focus group members the displays of ordinariness by celebrities, television presenters and ordinary people must be correctly balanced to be acceptable. This balance, I suggest, is a sophisticated acknowledgement of a system where levels of fame are checked and assessed against the notion of celebrity. To clarify, an acknowledged celebrity must have some displays of ordinariness, but these displays must not overshadow their performance as a celebrity. A female television presenter should acknowledge she is a privileged media subject and so display ordinary and unordinary in the correct balance. If presenters did not achieve this balancing act, they were mistrusted by the focus group and discussed as ‘fake’ or ‘trying too hard’. Similarly, a member of the public who becomes famous, such as a reality TV contestant, is always expected to be ordinary despite having access to a celebrity lifestyle. Gareth Palmer’s (2005) examination of the minor media figures that are known to be on the D-List of celebrity ranking is useful here. Palmer defines the D-List as ‘a space between the unknown mass of ordinary people and celebrity’, and the D-Lister is acknowledged by the press and audiences as ordinary:

The D-list may not have its own venues and few would be brazen enough to declare themselves members; however, readers and viewers of tabloid culture are taught a familiarity with those who have earned the designation; by a process of repetition they recognise the minor figures who have been condemned there and are invited to gaze upon them with a mixture of pity and scorn: the pity may derive from their sense of connection – the public may have been part of the reason they are “out there,” the scorn is for them still striving for fame when – by our agreement with the gossip communists – their moment has gone. We understand the D-Lister as someone who has failed to grasp their true economic value in the system (2005, p.41).

Similarly, Biressi and Nunn suggest that reality TV contestants:

... cannot appear pretentious. Pretentiousness is primarily a class charge which calls aspirant working- or lower-middle-class identities to order: “Who does she think she is kidding?” and “we can see right through him.” As Steph Lawler suggests, “pretentiousness is a charge levelled at people in whom what they seem to be is not (considered to be) what they are: in whom there is a gap between *being and seeming*” (2003, p.157).

The authors suggest that audiences find pleasure in identifying the inauthenticity of reality TV contestants, and they disparage their attempts to present themselves as something they are not.

The focus group members did identify inauthenticity in women television presenters, and to some extent this was for them a pleasurable collective experience. They also displayed anxiety and unease towards those people who are ‘out of place’ and have not in their assessment legitimate access to the media space. This system of checking and monitoring the media landscape by young girls, I suggest, is recognition of how fame works within a political economy. The media is a highly regulated space, and to negotiate this space successfully, both performers and audiences commonly acknowledge and work within its regulations. I also suggest that women in the media are subject to even tighter and more rigid rules, as they are also marginalised by their gender. The anxiety and unease the focus group members displayed was a response to their understanding of a gendered and regulated media landscape.

Bennett (2011, p.9) considers the idea of television personalities and the ordinary, ‘not in terms of “lack” in relation to the film star, but precisely as a site of their economic, ideological, textual and cultural importance’. In his work, Bennett makes the distinction between how the ordinary is presented through two different kinds of performance, namely those presenters that are ‘televisually skilled’ and those who are ‘vocationally skilled’ (2011, p.20) performers. Bennett uses Cilla Black and Graham Norton as examples of televisually skilled, and Delia Smith and Alan Titchmarsh as examples of vocationally skilled. This is an interesting distinction, as I would argue that the female presenters discussed herein are “televisually skilled” inasmuch as they are

not understood by audiences as holding any particular knowledge. However, unlike Norton and Black, who, as Bennett points out, were initially made famous through their previous careers (comedian and singer), these women are trained media presenters and display similar skills in terms of tone of voice, stance, body language and interviewing skills. Whilst Norton and Black, for example, can trade on their previous professional skills, these women cannot, and in this way perhaps they are more ordinary and less visible when taking up television space. Furthermore, whilst Norton and Black are expected to present a performance inasmuch as audiences expect to be entertained by their ability to interview and create an entertaining show, the female presenters discussed herein are more usually expected by audiences to direct the flow of the programme and remain in the background. It is this expectation that becomes contested and a point of conflict for audiences when these female presenters venture out of their inhabited space. Gamson (1994) notes that ‘celebrities are chosen for their ability to perform themselves amusingly, the performance of the host goes largely unnoticed’ (in Bennett, 2011, p. 119). The focus group appeared to be fully cognisant with the range of performances available to these presenters, and it is this recognition that caused a dilemma for the group.

Bennett identifies that being ordinary and also presenting this image on screen as authentic is ‘a performance that has to be worked at’ (2011, p.119). He also suggests that the performance contributes to the fame of the television personality, and it is also in relation to the kinds of pleasure this offers the audience. Whilst Bennett recognises that film studies have long discussed performance, television personalities have been largely ignored, which he suggests is due to the idea that they ‘perform themselves’ (2011, p.120) and their role is not valued or considered culturally important. Bennett’s description of Graham Norton’s performance within different television schedules is noteworthy here, as he recognises that different aspects of Norton’s persona are mobilised depending on the time the show is broadcast. For example, Norton will make reference to his sexuality on his late-night chat show but will be less revealing about his

own life in family shows broadcast earlier in the day. I find this very interesting, as the performances that Bennett discusses are indeed meant to reveal personality traits that are then traded on, in order to appeal to audiences. Audiences feel that they “know” and understand a particular television personality, and therefore they may feel more bonded to them as a result. This appears not to be the case with a number of female presenters discussed herein, as they are very limited or self-limiting in their performances, and their role is to facilitate and maintain the focus of the show on the subjects. Holly Willoughby’s performance on daytime television has caused much criticism in the press, as she is identified as too emotional and her credibility as a presenter is called into question.<sup>26</sup> In this case, Willoughby’s personality is contested, and the suggestion is that she is unappealing for audiences and therefore this performance does not enhance her on-screen persona. Willoughby transgresses the remit of the female television presenter and is criticised by audiences and by the press.

The following chapter is an examination of three high-profile presenters identified by the research group. Davina McCall was the sole presenter of *Big Brother* for over a decade and she is known by most teenagers. Her image on screen, when seen by my focus group, always sparked conversation, and the groups’ responses to the footage of her in a bikini on the *Big Brother* show caused a significant reaction. I decided to examine this presenter because of her longevity, the responses she elicits and the fact that she has been able to sustain a successful career. Holly Willoughby and Fearne Cotton were chosen because of the nostalgia these two presenters evoked for the group. The responses were quite intense, so I felt they were significant and also a good representation of the women these girls discussed. By carrying out these case studies, I hope to present a clearer landscape for the research findings. I also want to make connections between how the presenters

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<sup>26</sup> Hardie, B., 1<sup>st</sup> March 2012, Holly’s making a habit out of crying on the telly (it’s not Gareth Gates’ fault this time) Mirror online, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/holly-willoughby-cries-again-on-this-morning-749208> (accessed May 2012).

create their identities as women in a contemporary media world, how teenage girls interpret these subjectivities and finally how this helps them construct their own identities.

## Female Presenters Today



Fig. 3b Television presenter Davina McCall talking about her career on the website *icould*

In some ways, the female presenters under discussion are present in the lives of teenage girls as ubiquitous, free-floating entities. Their role as presenters means that they are present on screen, but they are not the focus of attention. I would argue that we could read the labour of female presenters as ‘housekeepers’ of the programme, making sure that the conversation between the main action of the show flows and that the programme reaches its end in a timely manner. This is quite similar to a domestic housewife role. Women who are housewives carry out similar tasks and they are in charge of the effective running of the home to facilitate the other members of the family in their outside activities. This may have some influence on the way audiences respond to female television presenters. The presenters have to be, at all times, relentlessly interested in the main action and the guests carrying out these actions. However they should not overshadow the main activity and in this sense they are like background noise. The idea that “anyone can be a television presenter” is a commonly held assumption by audiences (as I discussed earlier) and this is because the work that they do is invisible and undervalued, much like that of a housewife. This visibility/invisibility, where



they are present but mostly facilitators, contributes to our sense of their ubiquity and also their interchangeability. Each presenter undergoes media training and therefore has been introduced to the same or similar presenting techniques. So, to some extent, they are interchangeable in as much as an established set of rules about body language, tone of voice and posture is developed through training techniques. Media training refers to the presenting courses available for those people interested in a career in television presenting. This training usually teaches the presenter to be aware of the technical issues of the job, for example, which camera to look at and also how to stand, speak and react to the events of the programme. Television audiences are mostly conscious of these presenters as they play some part in their everyday lives, however small. Provided that a presenter is competent in their job, and that they work within the consensually understood notion of this role, they are accepted as background noise by audiences without comment. It is this ordinary relationship between audiences and presenters that separates them from celebrities. We expect some extraordinariness from celebrities, in terms of behaviour and lifestyle. However, television presenters are part of the everyday fabric of people's lives. Although we might be interested in some extraordinary behaviour, for example, presenters taking part in a reality television shows as contestants, we read this performance by the presenter within the context of their usual role. To clarify, a presenter is understood by audiences as a facilitator of information. When they perform outside this role, we still read them as presenters carrying out an extraordinary task. So consequently, our understanding of them has not changed fundamentally – they are still ordinary. It is this idea of ordinariness and the ways in which teenage girls discuss these women with familiarity that created this research project. The distinction between an ordinary television presenter and a television presenter who achieves some celebrity status is sometimes blurred, which makes the analysis of the presenters by the research group, and my understanding, somewhat complex. When these women appear in print and online as part of celebrity gossip forums, their ordinary status is reassessed temporarily by audiences and read by them through the narrative of celebrity. However,

female presenters are fundamentally recognised for their original role as a presenter, and in fact when they are thrown into the celebrity spotlight the research group discussed whether they ‘deserved’ this celebrity status. I observed during conversations with the group that the women could just as equally be disparaged by the research groups, and they expressed the idea ‘who does she think she is?’ about women they found to be stepping outside their established role as a television presenter. One focus group member, discussing presenter Claudia Winkleman’s appearance as a guest on a quiz, said:

I went to *Big Fat Quiz of the Year* to see it being filmed and she [Claudia Winkleman] was on it and she was the most annoying, like, attention-seeking person ever!

The purpose of appearing on this show is to entertain, so it is interesting that this group member found Winkleman annoying. My understanding of celebrity quiz shows is that the invited guests are required to entertain the audience, which would necessitate “attention seeking” pretty much by default. This group member, however, was uncomfortable with such a performance and supported the idea that these women are more ordinary than they are celebrities. I will return to this comment in my analysis of the group transcripts in Chapter 5.

This division between ordinary and celebrity is a complex area and has been addressed by Biressi and Nunn (2008, 2010), whose work is discussed throughout this chapter and again in Chapter 6. Sean Redmond (2006, 2007, 2010), Su Holmes (2005, 2006, 2007, 2010) and James Bennett (2010) have all made significant contributions to celebrity studies, and although a further consideration of celebrity studies would raise interesting questions, it is for the moment outside the remit of this research – it is the notion of the ‘housekeeper’ and the ways in which girls respond to these women as “just like a friend” which is of interest. The way in which the research group was able to describe these women is more about their easy accessibility through their television shows and their “visibility/invisibility” and domesticity, as discussed earlier, rather than their celebrity status. Later in this chapter I discuss this issue specifically in relation to

Fearne Cotton, in order to support the notion that these presenters are regarded as more ordinary than they are as celebrities.

To investigate further how audiences read television performances, Roger Silverstone's (1994) notions of "home" and "reach" are of interest, as he suggests that television has transformed our ideas about domesticity and our understanding of the concept of home:

Television and other media are part of home – part of its idealisation, part of its reality. The dimension of home that involves positive feelings of security and belonging are both challenged and reinforced by a medium that brings the world into the interior (1994, p.24).

What Silverstone is suggesting is that the concept of home is extended through television, as it acts as a link to shared values and to the world. Consensual ideas about the home and the media are bound up together as ideologies, while concepts of reality are identified through relationships constructed with the audience and the text. However, it is the 'quality of the contact – the quality of the touch' (1994, p.30) that Silverstone explores, and it is his concept of television and identity that is useful here. He is sceptical of the idea that because television is far-reaching in terms of audience figures, it is necessarily influential; it is more important to consider the quality of the contact with audiences, which is certainly a consideration when investigating the ways in which teenage girls read the images of female presenters. What is more, through its representations of domesticity, television can reflect our own understanding of the concept of home. Television, and in this case television presenters, can provide audiences with established notions of domesticity, which is particularly relevant when considering breakfast television with its living room sets and the conversational and friendly manner of the "husband and wife" co-presenters.

If we extend this understanding to contemporary presenters, their "housekeeping" role connects easily to ideas about domesticity. A female presenter for a female audience can be understood as a surrogate family member, for example a sister or a mother. This notion helps to inform the ways in which teenage girls in my research group discussed the women on screen, as their conversations

took on a familiarity with the presenter usually reserved for family or friends, and the disparagement they sometimes displayed towards these women could also be explained through this relationship. I will explore this idea in more detail when I discuss the research group findings in Chapter 5. My consideration of the role of domesticity in shaping the idea that teenage girls form quasi relationships with the presenters adds another layer of understanding to the transcripts. I suggest that the cultural “worth” of a television presenter, in terms of the audience’s respect for the role they carry out, is often quite nominal, which is linked to the content of the programmes that the women present – usually light entertainment shows and not intellectually challenging. The girls accumulate knowledge of these women in their formative years, and as I discuss in this chapter, these representations are limited and it is this cultural competence that forms the nature of the discourses in which they engage, as we will see in Chapter 5.

How these presenters established their career appeared to be of little interest to my research group, and there was a greater interest in the kinds of relationships and status that the women had achieved. The actual mechanics of their careers had less resonance for the group, unless there was a dramatic narrative attached. This contributes to the idea that these presenters are considered as ordinary, lucky, in the right place at the right time or pretty enough to be a presenter. These are all observations made by young girls about female presenters, which may contribute to their expectations of these women inasmuch as these girls are surprised by neither the success nor the failure of these women. The research group was less concerned with how the women reached this point in their career, and it is this lack of investment in the process of a presenter’s career development that is of interest. Clearly then, despite my initial assessment, the women are not career role models for the girls to follow. The conversations that we had did not explore the ways in which these women find work in the media. In terms of ambition, if discussed at all by the group, this mostly focused on the presenters’ ambition to be famous, not ambition to develop a career in any particular direction. The group was not flattering about women in television who displayed

ambition; in fact, the members were suspicious and derisive. For example, Kate Thornton was identified by the group as a presenter of *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004- ), a show on which she had reportedly asked the production company for a salary increase. This news garnered incredulity from the research group, and they were actually alarmed by her audacity. I suggest that the group understood the precariousness of the position of a female in television, particularly that of a younger female, as they were not as derisive of older and more established women. By requesting a salary increase, Thornton exposed herself to an assessment of her worth, which was a vulnerable position in which to place herself, as she was scrutinised by the media and ridiculed for her audacity. The focus group was angry and also anxious about this scenario, and one girl commented ‘More pay for that? She doesn’t do anything!’ while another commented ‘she’s the one who gets paid for doing nothing.’ These comments, I suggest, are a response to the pressures of being judged against masculine values. Asking for a pay rise signifies Thornton’s confidence, her sense of her own worth and her ease with competitive ideas of entitlement. The responses from these two girls support the idea that female presenters are understood as “background noise” and “housekeepers,” to maintain the flow of the programmes they present.

Although the research group was sometimes seduced by the friendliness and ordinariness of the women on screen, the idea of entitlement is contrary to this notion, in that it is the friendly and ordinary persona that attracted the girls initially, and they began to construct relationships and attachments to these representations. To understand this point is to go some way to identifying that the women were not role models for these girls in the conventional sense. The focus group transcripts reveal a much more complex set of relationships where the women were used as barometers of the female landscape. The stories that the girls created around these women were used by them as illustrations of the obstacles or pathways that they themselves may encounter. It is because they perceived these women as more ordinary than extraordinary that they were able to attach significance to their actions. The girls appeared to navigate the narratives of domesticity,

drama, jeopardy, success and relationships through these women. To provide some brief examples as a prelude to Chapter 5, the group discussed marriage and children using Davina McCall as a reference. Julie commented, ‘... it does because it shows that although you make mistakes in life you can pick yourself up – she’s, like, a mother now to two children’. The group identified that although Davina had had problems in life, she was able to redress this through motherhood. Drama and jeopardy were discussed frequently by the group, as exemplified by this comment by Sophie about Katie Price: “And she’s got so many life experiences as well, like Harvey being really ill... like in her book she has, like, loads of dodgy things like when she started as a glamour model....” The group continued this conversation with a dramatic narrative about the danger Price had been exposed to by an unsavoury male photographer. This story served to reinforce the vulnerability of women and the group were impressed by Price’s ability to survive this scare.

These themes echo some of the ways in which television presenting is described by journalists, media institutions and audiences. The focus in all of these examples is on physical appearance and personality rather than intellect and ambition. This comment was made by a BBC commissioning editor:

Finding (or becoming) a TV presenter is a strange business. It requires a peculiar cocktail of things to come together. Do they make you want to lean towards the telly? Are they good, but somehow unmemorable? Are they too similar to someone we’re already working with? Is there something slightly dodgy about their eyes? Can they actually tell a story? Have we got a programme idea in our sights they’d be right for? What have they done already? Can they get the time off (Shilling law, 2011)?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Shillinglaw, K., 2011, BBC commissioning editor for science and natural history responds to accusations that not enough women are given the chance to present science on TV. *The Guardian* (online) available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/may/03/women-science-tv> (accessed June 2012).

The presenter has to make the audience ‘lean towards the telly’, yet not overshadow the content of the programme, which supports the notion of visibility/invisibility discussed earlier. The idea that they have to ‘tell a story’ suggests that they do not need to understand the story but be good at connecting with the audience. This newspaper article describes Venture Artistes, an agency for television presenters, and it comments on the benefits of becoming a presenter:

If you’re hell-bent on becoming famous, the most obvious course to take nowadays is that of the television presenter. Forget about spending years in a malodorous garret perfecting a novel; as a TV presenter you get beamed into the unsuspecting living rooms of millions of punters at once. And, with the riotous escalation of satellite, there’s no shortage of celebrity pie to go round.

That’s where Mike Hollingsworth comes in. Former BBC Breakfast Time and TV-am guru, one of the most experienced producers in the business, and husband of Anne Diamond, Hollingsworth these days runs a company called Venture Artistes, which represents up-and-coming television talent. Hollingsworth is also able to advise people in the midst of flourishing alternative careers when they want to make the move into television:

Hollingsworth is able to draw on his vast knowledge of the business to groom his clients and make them more marketable commodities. “What presenters need constantly is feedback about how well or badly they’ve performed,” Hollingsworth says (Poole, 1995).

The emphasis here is on fame and marketability. The article suggests a shortcut to fame through high exposure to ‘millions of punters at once’. The responsibility of the agent in this case is to make the person a “marketable commodity.” In the case of presenters, their fame is dependent on their ability to present the ordinary without attracting too much attention. The consensual relationship between audiences and presenters is that audiences use the discourses of domesticity, ordinariness, friendship and empathy to engage with the presenter, and in this way these women are “just like us.” Presenters communicate with their audiences through familiarity with ordinary lifestyles and by comparing themselves with ordinary people. The following comments are from two female presenters identified by my research group, each of whom is clear in their affirmation of their ordinariness. Holly Willoughby, interviewed early in her career, comments:

I'm quite old-fashioned. I can't wait for the day I get married and start having children. I've always said one day I'll run away and spend my time making jam. I'm not planning on all that right now, but it's something I'd want to do eventually (Williams, n.d.).<sup>28</sup>

Also, Davina McCall when interviewed for *icould*, an organisation that gives career advice to young people, comments:

Spending time with my family is kind of the most, the most amazing luxury that I have. I love it... Even worse, knitting. What's that about? I used to knit when I was younger. I've just got the needles out again. Love it. I can only do scarves because I can't quite turn a corner, but it's fine, fine (McCall, 2011).<sup>29</sup>

Both of these presenters take the opportunity to discuss the ordinary – the domestic – and use examples of stereotypical feminine activities, in particular jam making and knitting. This serves to ground the relationships within a familial discourse whereby girls experience these women as successful in their career, yet they are still able to refer to domesticity as the ideal. This sits comfortably within a neoliberal formulation of femininity whereby female subjectivity is represented as a composite of a series of choices from the personal and public sphere. The reality of this situation is that a high-profile presenting career gives these women opportunities to escape the ordinary through their salaries, their lifestyle and their contacts with celebrities, stars and the media business. The job demands long hours and a commitment to putting their career before the domestic and the ordinary. Much of the promotional material that can be found on the websites of these presenters shows them attending a range of public events. These events clearly take up a great deal of their time; however, their intense concentration on their career is not usually in focus, and this concealment is what makes the women appealing, as they do not outwardly display ambition.

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, A., (n.d.), Holly Willoughby, *Metro* (online) available at, <http://www.metro.co.uk/showbiz/interviews/834-holly-willoughby#ixzz1udndjo7r> (accessed June 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Davina McCall, TV Presenter (online) available at <http://icould.com/videos/davina-mccall/> (accessed June 2011).



The following is an online posting from a young girl (aged 13) who wants to know how to become a television presenter. I have also included the helpful response from a PR student:

### **Want to be a TV presenter (read more)?**

It's my dream to become a TV presenter when I'm older, or something like that anyway. I'm only thirteen at the moment so i may change my mind when I'm older, but i just want to know how i could become a TV presenter. I'm funny and entertaining and good at acting and stuff. I've never been to a drama school or anything so could that be something to consider? I'm not the most confident person but I'm getting more confident as i get older. I would quite like to be a presenter for a children's TV show or a reality show or something. That wil [sic] probably never happen! but i always aim high!! so how could i get in to tv presenting when I'm older? please and thanks :) x

Advice from a PR student:

Having a career in television really doesn't have much to do with your grades or what course you pick. You need to be good-looking, speak clearly, be confident, all of these aren't things you can learn at an academic level. It sounds shallow but it's sadly the truth. I mean it depends on the subject you're presenting on, clearly to present a program about space you need to be knowledgeable on the subject, but for presenting kids TV or a music channel or something it's all about your image. Source(s) PR student.<sup>30</sup>

These comments confirm the idea that image and confidence are marketable commodities. The inference is that audiences are more comfortable with attractive people speaking and acting with confidence than intellectual people who are notionally unattractive. The young girl seeking advice is clearly hesitant about her suitability for the role of presenter, and she lists her attributes and failings without reference to her academic abilities. The young girl is simultaneously offering up her 'dream to be a TV presenter' for public acknowledgement as well as creating her own disclaimer: "That wil [sic] probably never happen! but I always aim high!!". This appears typical of young girls' self-imposed restrictions on ideas of success and ambition. There appears to be a complex relationship built between young girls and presenters, and that these women are defined by their appearance is clear and reinforced by the PR student. The young girl seeking advice is self-effacing and not able to be confident about her own appearance, which she does not discuss

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<sup>30</sup> Yahoo UK online thread discussing careers and education  
<http://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20111030072659AAwyHae>  
(accessed 27<sup>th</sup> January 2012).

at all. She is also responding to the ways in which female presenters display a lack of entitlement, in that their friendly and ordinary personas in interviews discuss luck and not ambition – narratives on which the young girl is drawing.

What is not acknowledged by any of the comments above is that to become a presenter you have to be very ambitious, focused and willing initially to work for a small salary or to work for free for the experience. Presenters are trained to absorb information quickly, act spontaneously and also follow instructions from the studio gallery in their earpiece. They have to be willing to listen to critical feedback from their employers and are also expected to endure the media spotlight in terms of their personal life and be constantly mindful of their reputation. A negative story about them would harm their reputation – and therefore the reputation of their employers – and they would consequently lose their marketability.

The women presenters identified by my research group are successful and have presented high-profile television shows. However, their careers are quite often overshadowed by their male counterparts. My research suggests that women are less successful at negotiating and developing their careers than their male colleagues. This may suggest that women presenters have a different understanding of ambition and success, which may be because of their experiences as women in a culturally and economically patriarchal environment. That they are less successful than men is understood and accepted uncritically by a teenage female audience, the understanding of which forms part of the ways in which girls navigate and discuss women in television. This understanding, I suggest, is articulated by the young 13-year-old girl discussed earlier: she is self-limiting in her hopes for her career in response to her own understanding of media images of female presenters. The implication is that to appear too obviously ambitious is to seem too confident, which is not a typically female trait. This matches the sentiments of students I have encountered and discussed earlier in this work, in that they were also cautious about articulating ambition.

Male presenters appear to have different approaches and opportunities when managing their careers. For example, Graham Norton is a presenter for programmes such as *The Graham Norton Show* (BBC, *So Television*, and May 2007- ). Norton set up his own production company *So Television* in 2000, which he uses to deliver his BBC programmes. His company's website describes the awards won by Norton himself and the awards by other shows that are part of *So Television*. This is clearly a successful production company, the success of which allows Norton independence and creative control over his career, as he is able to negotiate with the BBC and has the authority and power to be recognised and regarded by the broadcast company. Norton has been the subject of much debate around the BBC's extravagant and excessive salary pay outs: 'Companies House accounts for Norton's production firm *So Television* reveal he earned £2.15million in "presenter and production fees and royalties"' (Thomas, 2012). In contrast to this salary, a recent news article (Ellicott, 2012) discovered that despite drawing in a bigger audience than Graham Norton's chat show, the female presenters of the BBC programme *Rip Off Britain* (BBC 1, 2009-) earned £1,000 per episode, and therefore around £20,000 in total for the series. Clearly, the fact that Norton has set up his own company has a significant bearing on his worth for the BBC. The female presenting team, Angela Rippon, Gloria Hunniford and Julia Somerville, are all aged over 60 and in this case appear to suffer from both ageism and sexism. When interviewed, Angela Rippon draws attention to the inequality at play, making reference to the sports presenters on *Match of the Day* (BBC 1964- ):

But on *Match Of The Day*, which draws a lower audience of 4.5million, Alan Hansen is paid the equivalent of £40,000 an episode and Alan Shearer about £10,000.

Hansen receives £1.5million for his role, though it will be cut to £1million next season, and Shearer earns about £400,000.

The female presenters argue that they should be paid more because it draws an impressively large peak-time audience each week.

Miss Rippon said: "It is frustrating. We are a top-ten audience programme and it would be lovely to get top-ten pay. You might assume that the BBC would pay by ratings, but it does not."

A member of the *Rip Off* team said everyone on the programme was angered by the disparity in pay with *Match Of The Day*.

The BBC said pay depended on factors including “the type of programme someone presents, the time of day it is broadcast and any requirement of specialist knowledge. It is not, however, dependent on age or sex” (Ellicott, 2012).<sup>31</sup>

This is an ambiguous explanation by the BBC and highlights their lack of consistency over salaries and contracts. The female presenters that were identified by my research group have not set up their own companies and have short- and long-term contracts with individual production companies. This may be a particularly gendered response to a career in broadcasting. Women presenters may not have the same expectations as males, or be afforded the same opportunities. These two factors are interdependent, with one influencing the other. The low expectations of women, because of the lack of opportunities provided, results in restrictive practices on the part of the institution and the women. Presenters Holly Willoughby and Fearne Cotton have become involved with a clothing range, and Davina McCall has several keep fit DVDs on the market, so whilst they are not so publically in charge of their presenting careers, they are taking some advantage of commercial revenues. However, why more women working in the media do not set up a more secure employment basis is of interest and contributes to ideas about their sense of worth and willingness to accept a lack of control of their career in comparison to males. The presenters hosting the show *Rip Off Britain* are the women journalists who presented the news in the 1980s and ‘90s. In particular, and ironically, Angela Rippon was a prominent and ground-breaking female newsreader. This longevity and experience would suggest that she would be able to command bargaining power with the television channel, which is clearly not the case. For my research group, the significance of the reporting of excessive salaries for males in the media must influence their understanding of the “worth” of female presenters by comparison. This is further entrenched by

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<sup>31</sup> Ellicott, C., 2012, ‘So much for “cherishing” female presenters: Figures show BBC’s male staff earn up to 40 times as much as women. *The Daily Mail* (online) available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2100272/BBCs-male-staff-earn-40-times-women.html#ixzz1wuVYMAPS> (accessed March 2012).

the ways in which these women are considered ordinary and lucky, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

What follows is an analysis of three contemporary television presenters, Davina McCall, Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby. These three women were popular choices for my focus group and for other girls who completed the questionnaires, and they were often the subject of conversations amongst girls with whom I discussed presenters during my initial research. I will provide a brief overview of their careers and discuss some of the ways in which the research group discussed these women. I will also explore how the narratives of neoliberalism and post-feminism are naturalised through these accounts and how these may play a part in the construction of girls' subjectivities.

## Conceptualising the Female Presenter

### Davina McCall



Fig. 4 Davina McCall

In the UK, Davina McCall was the presenter of *Big Brother* (Channel 4, Endemol 2000-2010) between the first series in 2000 and the last one on Channel 4 in 2010. McCall was reputed to have

earned around £500,000 per series of *Big Brother*,<sup>32</sup> and whilst the show has been the subject of much academic debate and popular discussion, McCall herself does not come under the same scrutiny. In fact, she is only ever referenced academically in connection with conversations she may have with *Big Brother* contestants and in terms of the popular press, where she is the subject of lifestyle magazine articles. My initial research with teenage girls revealed an acknowledgement of McCall as important and influential. Alongside other women in television, she has formed part of the backdrop or wallpaper of teenage girls' lives. During my research, I heard McCall referred to by young girls as 'just like a friend'. Also, in a conversation about this research, a female MA student in her twenties commented, 'you feel like she's your friend,' which I suggest illustrates the legacy of the attachments made to female presenters by teenage girls – young women still refer to McCall with a familiarity and affection that is noteworthy. This comment left by a fan of McCall is typical of the many I found on online threads: 'Love Davina => brill presenter and soo genuine!! => just want to huuug her => xxx lol By Amy' (posted September 14 2009 at 9:32 PM).<sup>33</sup>

Clearly then, this kind of audience response is contrary to academic debate on the reception of television presenters by audiences. It is this relationship forged amongst teenage girls and female presenters that is of research interest here. I will discuss three of these presenters in terms of their industry status and kinds of television they present, in order to explore how young girls experience these women. I have chosen these three women specifically because they appeared to generate a great deal of debate amongst girls, in my experience, and specifically the girls in the focus group.

Davina McCall began her career in broadcasting on MTV in 1992 as a presenter on *MTV's Most Wanted* (MTV, 1992-1995). This was followed by *God's Gift* (ITV, 1995-1998), a late-night ITV show

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<sup>32</sup> Mirror.co.uk 10<sup>th</sup> March 2009 Davina McCall and other Channel 4 stars set for pay cut - <http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/davina-mccall-and-other-channel-4-stars-381463> (accessed January 2010)

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.newsoftheworld.co.uk/fabulous/celebs/328062/The-many-faces-of-Davina-McCall.html> (accessed 26th January 2012).

transmitted after midnight. These shows were aimed at a teenage audience and followed reality television conventions. McCall has remained in this genre, usually interviewing ordinary people about their relationships. It is this focus on the ordinary lives of people that has positioned McCall in the minds of audiences as ‘just like a friend’. In 1998, she worked on *Streetmate* (Channel 4, 1998-2001), a dating game show which became a cult hit with teenagers. The premise of this programme was that McCall would approach men or women in the street and introduce them to a potential girl- or boyfriend. The legacy of this programme and the presenter lives on in the memories of young women now in their twenties, who would have watched this programme in their teenage years. In a recent (March, 2012) episode of McCall’s live quiz show *The Million Pound Drop* (C4, Endemol, 2010-), the two female contestants side-tracked the conversation to let McCall know how much they missed the show *Streetmate* and her performance. Their admiration for McCall was evident, commenting, ‘we loved you in that, you were so great’. The two contestants appeared oblivious to the live show constraints and were clearly anxious to let McCall know how they felt about her. This behaviour is typical of how girls I have spoken to throughout this research have responded to this presenter, as McCall is often identified as a ‘friend’ and ‘just like us’. It is the notion that she is an ordinary person, and her apparent sincerity, that appeals to female audiences.

McCall’s contract is predominantly with Endemol, the creators of *Big Brother*, and she is now working on *The Million Pound Drop*, another show by Endemol,<sup>34</sup> which has a global presence in broadcasting and produces over 40,000 hours of programming through over 500 different shows broadcast in 200 countries. In 2008, 300 million people accessed their online video views for *Big Brother*. Endemol prefer to refer to its reality television provision as “non-scripted TV,” and it includes in this category programmes such as *Star Academy* (BBC, 2002-2007) and *Deal or No Deal* (C4, 2005- ). Davina McCall, then, is part of a global entertainment media company that produces

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<sup>34</sup> [www.endemol.com](http://www.endemol.com) (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012).

formulaic and highly successful programming. She was included on the '100 most powerful women in Britain list' (*The Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2010) and was described thus:

Davina McCall, 43

*Big Brother* turned McCall into a household name and she is now one of Britain's most highly paid television presenters. *Big Brother* may be over, but McCall's place in the nation's hearts seems secure.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this high praise from audiences and institutions, McCall does not appear to be able to control her own career fully, and she remains contracted to Endemol. This appears to be conventional behaviour for a number of women in television, preferring to remain on contract than set up their own production company. In 2009, McCall revealed in an interview that she had plans to take control of her own career:

"I want some control in what I do next." Through gritted teeth ("I really shouldn't tell you") she reveals that she is planning her own one-woman, "multi-platform" TV project. In fits and starts, she says it will be a daytime chat show, that it will have an online life as well as in print perhaps. It sounds Oprah-is, I venture. She smiles broadly. "Well, I'm not Oprah Winfrey, but that kind of thing." She is planning to film a pilot before the end of the year and hopes that the programme will go out on Five or Sky 1. There is no room on Channel 4, her home for the past decade? "No, not currently." (Thread Davina Interview 2009).<sup>36</sup>

I could not find any other reference to this project other than a denial from Sky 1 and Five (Holmwood, 2009) that they were considering this project, and therefore I can only presume that despite McCall's efforts, the project did not happen:

However, both Five and Sky1 have said it was not something they were currently considering. A senior insider at Five said: "Would we really want to do a chat show with Davina? She is a great talent, but chat show hostess, not."

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/8133796/100-most-powerful-women-in-Britain-Entertainment-Media-and-Sport.html> (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012).

<sup>36</sup> The original interview is printed in *The Times* May 2009. Accessed online in theblueroom, Topic: Insightful Davina interview from May this year Posted: 09 Sep 2009. [http://www.theblueroom.me.uk/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=24735&PID=346169](http://www.theblueroom.me.uk/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=24735&PID=346169) (accessed February 2012).



This contrasts sharply with the successful projects described earlier by Graham Norton, and it highlights the differences between the two careers. The research group, during our conversations, made reference to McCall's attempts to host a chat show for the BBC (*Davina*, 15<sup>th</sup> February–12<sup>th</sup> April 2006), one member commenting, 'I think she's only famous because of *Big Brother*; she tried to write her own show and it failed'. They mostly agreed with the negative critical reviews (Holmwood, 2009) of McCall's performance and were particularly harsh in their condemnation of the presenter. Throughout the focus group sessions I began to recognise that this is a fairly typical response to "failure" by female presenters. The judgements made by the research group were usually unforgiving, thus highlighting for me the sense of jeopardy that the group felt for the women. The failure of the chat show exposed McCall as vulnerable in a very masculine world. I will explore this sense of jeopardy in Chapter 5, as it does make a significant contribution to how teenage girls engage with female presenters.

## Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby



Fig. 5 Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby

Fearne Cotton has been a television presenter for over ten years. She began on *GMTV* presenting children's television in 1998 when she was 15, and she has had a wide and varied career which includes presenting shows such as *Children in Need* (BBC1, 2005-). She was the first female BBC Radio 1 presenter to present a morning show (BBC, 2005- ), and also appears regularly on the quiz show *Celebrity Juice* (Channel 4, 2008- ). In partnership with another television presenter, Holly Willoughby, she promotes the online retail store *very.co.uk* and also has a clothing range available through this website. Fearne Cotton's website blog describes her own life, using as its mode of address a very down to earth approach. Cotton promotes her clothing range for *very.co.uk* (Shop Direct Group) in a conversational way as if she is addressing friends:

Holly and I have also got to spend some time together this last week as we shot the new TV advert for *very.co.uk*. It's a beaut! I can't tell you too much, but if you enjoyed the ice-skating Christmas TV ad you're going to adore this next spring one! It will be on the TV from March the 1st! My *Converse* are now also available on line at [very.co.uk](http://very.co.uk) and are going down a treat.

This conversational approach seamlessly incorporates her fashion line into a blog about her day. On closer inspection the fashion item she refers to is an already established brand, *Converse*, and Cotton simply adds her name to the product. Cotton is therefore neither the designer nor the creator of the product; however, her blog establishes her ownership through the phrase 'my *Converse*.' This is

interesting in its deceit, in that the name “Fearne Cotton” is used by *very.co.uk* and is teamed with “Holly Willoughby,” which serves to commodify their friendship. Neither of the presenters is a fashion designer, so it is their branding on the product that promotes sales. During my fieldwork I found that the focus group was keenly aware of how television presenters were branded and promoted. The focus group also understood why these women were exploiting their images and they discussed the financial incentives for following this strategy. During a discussion about Katie Price, Sophie commented:

And you can see that through the TV show, if she puts anything on hold to make sure she can do well and it's publicised enough for her to make money. So I think on that kind of side you should look up to her, but not the glamour modelling side because you're just presenting yourself as an image to men rather than an actual person... (Sophie, focus group member).

However, they were not usually approving of those women who worked with brands and therefore were not in control of their image, and their conversations suggested to me that branding and advertising by presenters removed them from the ordinary. This conversation about Davina McCall's television advertisement for hair dye suggests the group were sceptical of McCall's authenticity when representing hair products:

Sophie – You know, the thing that makes her worse is that advert she's in for hair dye.

Lornette – Oh my god, when she says ‘NO, MUM’!

Julie – Yeah, that just made her go... (mimes going down).

All – Yeah.

When reading the items on Fearne Cotton's website, we are encouraged to accept the narratives here of an “ordinary person in extraordinary situation.” The suggestion is that she is just like us and will negotiate the world of celebrity on our behalf. Cotton reinforces her ordinariness with her reference to an interview with Johnny Depp:

This week I also got to interview one of my favourite actors in the world, Mr Johnny Depp, alongside the genius that is Tim Burton. I was a tad giddy walking in to the posh hotel knowing what I was about to do, and as I entered the rather packed press room full of journalists and presenters from around the world, I knocked over a HUGE Alice in

Wonderland poster off an easel. Great start. Luckily the interview went well and I managed to look and sound rather normal, although I was screaming and whooping inside!<sup>37</sup>

It is this notion of ordinary and extraordinary, but in the right balance, that appeals to teenage audiences, as my focus group findings revealed. In Fearne Cotton's biography, she establishes herself as lucky and therefore, by implication, ordinary: 'People always think I'm a millionaire because I work in television, but I'm not that rich. I have been very lucky, though' (Goodall, 2008).

This reference to "luck" serves to suppress any acknowledgement of the mechanics of a successful career in television presenting, making it appear effortless and achievable. This attempts to impress on young female audiences how easy it is to become a presenter. Whilst young girls know that this is not really true, they are engaged by the representations of successful women. This research does not specifically address questions surrounding celebrity and cultural identity, and the women in question here are not usually acknowledged as celebrities by their audiences (as discussed earlier, they are the "housekeepers" of the television programmes they present). They do, however, appear in magazines as points of interest for readers, as we often are asked to examine their access to celebrities, for example Fearne Cotton's television series *Fearne and...* (ITV2, 2009-2010). In this show, Cotton interviews a number of celebrities. The documentary style of the show allows her to look to camera and address the audience, commenting on the behaviour of the celebrity in question. In this way, Cotton is able to maintain her ordinariness and the audience is able to identify with her interpretation of celebrity culture. Television presenters can then be seen as "proxy celebrities," inasmuch as they inhabit the celebrity environment as our mediators, but without actually becoming an acknowledged celebrity.

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<sup>37</sup> The official Fearne Cotton website available at <http://www.officalfearnecotton.com/category/blog> (accessed February 2012).

My understanding of the focus group members is that they distinguished between the female presenters they discussed and their understanding of celebrity. This differentiation is important to acknowledge, as it impacts on how the focus group interpreted the behaviour of the female presenters under scrutiny. The group appeared to engage in a different relationship with these presenters than with celebrities, showing the importance of formulating a critical framework for understanding the role of the television presenter.

Audience responses to Fearne Cotton acknowledge her ordinariness, as none of the signs of commodification are outwardly present, and “natural” and conversational references to her clothing line appear coincidental and seamlessly form part of her blog entry. This is made apparent in the contrast between Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby, who are seen as “friends” but who also prompted very different responses in my focus group. Cotton has a comprehensive presence online and can be found on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, where she regularly updates audiences with anecdotal commentaries on her life, and she also has a book review section on her website. The website has a number of links to *very.co.uk*, thus strengthening the connection between her and the branded clothing range.

By contrast, Holly Willoughby began her career in modelling and moved into television presenting through an audition for children’s television. She has a very public friendship with Fearne Cotton and both presenters make reference to each other constantly:

An advertising campaign featuring Fearne Cotton and TV presenter Holly Willoughby helped its *Very.co.uk* brand notch up a 26% increase in total sales. *Very*, which was rebranded from Littlewoods Direct earlier this year, saw customer traffic rise 31% (Johnson, 2009).

This advertising campaign shows the two presenters as the faces of *very.co.uk*, and their endorsement has shown an increase in sales by 26% and a customer traffic rise of 31%. Clearly this indicates their popularity with audiences. During my fieldwork focus group sessions, the teenage girls found this

friendship very appealing and felt a sense of identification with these women. Their “down to earth” nature was identified and applauded for its authenticity. This response was revealing, as the group also displayed a sense of nostalgia towards these two presenters, whose on-screen friendship had been part of the girls’ childhood and they recalled that they had watched these women in their early teens (around 13 and 14 years). Holly Willoughby was then heavily criticised by the group when the press began to focus on her physical appearance, notably her low-cut dresses revealing her cleavage. *The Daily Mail* headline ‘Holly Willoughby’s plunging neckline heats up *Dancing on Ice*’ (Revoir, 2008) was one of many national newspapers that reported on Willoughby as a sexualised image. The sense of betrayal displayed by the research group as a response to Willoughby’s behaviour is evidence of their investment in these presenters, which I will discuss in more detail later in this work.

More recently, Holly Willoughby has replaced Fern Britton as co-presenter of daytime show *This Morning* (ITV, 2010-) and she also co-presents reality television show *The Voice* (BBC1, 2012) with Reggie Yates. Like the other two presenters, her life is a constant point of reference in celebrity magazines, newspapers, online and on-screen. A recent article in the *Daily Mail*,<sup>38</sup> written by an agent for presenters, scathingly attacks Willoughby:

How can a bimbo like Holly Willoughby be worth £10m? An acerbic view by the agent who represented Jill Dando, Anne Diamond and Fern Britton.

Just in case you ever wondered what was so wrong with television today, you need look no further than presenter Holly Willoughby and the news that she is on her way to amassing a £10 million fortune. How has she done it? Not by showing a single flicker of talent, that’s for sure.

The article continues with an unfavourable comparison of younger presenters such as Willoughby and Cotton with more established presenters such as Anne Diamond (discussed earlier). The main criticism of Willoughby is the way she is using her fame: ‘Holly, 32, has managed to use her place

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<sup>38</sup> Roseman, J., 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2013, ‘How can a bimbo like Holly Willoughby be worth £10m? An acerbic view by the agent who represented Jill Dando, Anne Diamond and Fern Britton’, *The Daily Mail* online (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013).

on the famous morning sofa and its £250,000 salary as a springboard to earn a further reported £40,000 from BBC1's *The Voice* and thousands more for a raft of advertising campaigns'. The issue here is that Willoughby is able to exercise good business sense to become more successful, which is not normally a criticism aimed at male presenters. The author's other criticism is that she is not credible as a presenter, as she does not exhibit the serious journalistic skills that her predecessors have done, and here he refers to Fern Britton, Anne Diamond and Jill Dando and points out that all these women were originally journalists – and therefore more competent. The article does not discuss the journalistic credentials of Willoughby's co-presenter Phillip Schofield, and his competence or salary are not questioned. The article continues by commenting, 'I should point out that Holly is an underwear model turned children's TV presenter'. This is clearly intentionally disparaging, and I suggest that this is a favoured position for many spokespeople within the media. These women are often referred to in a sexualised manner, their appearance is the prime reference and the women become familiar with the way in which they are addressed and represented. However, when they appear to make a success of their careers, which is usually identified in terms of financial reward, they are then disparaged for their appearance and lack of credentials. This is an astonishing double standard. Prior to Willoughby's fame there were very few newspaper articles that discussed the journalistic abilities of Fern Britton, Anne Diamond or Jill Dando. In fact, as I discussed earlier, Anne Diamond's career in breakfast television was defined by her personal life, her appearance and her on-screen relationship with her co-host Nick Owen; she was not usually discussed as a serious journalist.

All three presenters – Davina McCall, Holly Willoughby and Fearne Cotton – are signed with James Grant Media, and despite several telephone calls, emails and written requests I was not able to make contact with any of them, which could otherwise have added another dimension to my research. However, how these and other presenters are understood by teenage girls is of prime importance here. These examples represent a brief investigation into the careers and employment terms of

television presenters. Some of the examples reveal gender inequality and a perspective on how women are perceived both in the media and by audiences which is hard to defend. How do the inequalities embedded in the representation of female presenters impact on those who consume the programmes on which they work?

## **Television presenters and the political economy**

Silverstone (1994, p.109) identifies that the consumption of media images, particularly through television, is one of the 'main processes by which individuals are incorporated into contemporary society'. Whilst he acknowledges that this is an ideological process expressing dominant ideas, it also 'involves activity and passivity, competence and incompetence, expertise and ignorance'. This brings into focus a central theme of this research, which is what happens to teenage girls when they consume images of female television presenters. Silverstone, in his assessment of television and consumption, identifies commodification as essential to understanding this process. If we interpret commodification as described by Silverstone (1994, p.106), as 'not an antagonism to culture, not even a repression of culture, but an embodiment of culture', then we can begin to make an assessment of commodification, television presenters and the resulting impact on teenage girls. To explain how commodification is an embodiment of culture, Silverstone outlines the notion of goods as symbols. By this he refers to the way in which commodities come to have a symbolic value within society, the value of which is classified or codified into a system of meanings. These meanings are then negotiated by audiences, which is the way that we create narratives for how we understand the world in which we live. Our identities are:

... formed on the web of consumer possibilities and in the choice and displays of objects to hang on it. We speak through our commodities, about ourselves and to each other, making claims for status and for difference, and actively and creatively marking out a map for the negotiation of everyday life (Silverstone 1994, p.107).



We can interpret the lives of female television presenters as commodified objects, inasmuch as they are bound by contract to global organisations such as Endemol and the BBC. In this way they are part of ‘the web of consumer possibilities’ discussed by Silverstone, from which teenage audiences can begin to form identities and negotiate life. What is interesting to consider here is how limiting or enlightening this can be for teenage girls. Female presenters are valued less than others in the media, for example less than male presenters, and we have seen an example of this through the exploration of how institutions and audiences recognise their “worth.” This may be the reason why girls form attachments, because these women are ordinary and also limited by gender inequality. To be limited by gender inequality, consciously or unconsciously, can be a passive act, by which I mean that by simply not questioning inequality or recognising its existence, existing norms can be reinforced. This notion of limitation can also provide comfort to young girls; to recognise the potential “dangers” of girlhood and adulthood through the behaviour of female presenters is to be forewarned. Therefore, female presenters are not role models for teenage girls, but they do serve to highlight the dangers and jeopardy involved in life. They create a ‘map for the negotiation of everyday life’ (Silverstone 1994, p.107) or, put another way for young girls, a jeopardy map.

Silverstone identifies the possibilities of commodification for audiences, and these ideas lead me to consider further the implications of introducing a political-economic perspective to this research. I have become particularly aware of the notion of women working in television as exploited labour, contributing to the profits of global entertainment organisations. There are some similarities between women on contract in television and the actors on contract in the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and ‘40s. These Hollywood actors were employed by movie studios on contracts ranging from short term to seven years’ duration. The actors had little control over the parts they played and they were directly monitored and controlled by the Hollywood studios’ publicity departments and often rented out to other studios without consultation. Chiefly, it is the lack of control by the television presenters of their own career that is striking, and whether this is a

matter of choice on the part of female presenters or a lack of opportunity is debateable. I will briefly provide a case study as an example of the way that women in television are utilised, so that I can add substance to my argument.

Kerry Katona is a media personality, a former member of the female pop group *Atomic Kitten* and infamous for her former drug use – she was caught on camera snorting cocaine (*Mail Online*, August, 2009), which resulted in her subsequent bankruptcy. Katona is not one of the women specifically chosen by my focus group, and so I can only refer to her in terms of how she can illustrate the way women in television can be used. Her reality show *Kerry Katona: The Next Chapter* (ITV 2, *Cann Television*, 2010 -2011) follows the publicly bankrupt Katona as she struggles to revive her media career and therefore her financial health. The show openly discusses her financial status, which is in fact the impetus and mainstay of the show. Her management company, *Cann Associates*, rents a large property for her and her children (she is a single parent), and she is given work so that she can pay off her debts. The show highlights the loneliness of the job, showing her on long photo shoots and appearing on a number of daytime television shows. These are used as PR exercises in an attempt to revive media and audience interest in Katona, whose privacy in this reality show is traded by her for financial stability for herself and her family. She is under constant media scrutiny, and at the insistence of her management she undergoes a strict diet and exercise regime. She is also subjected to drug tests to confirm that she is no longer addicted to cocaine. She regularly meets her life coaches (provided by her management team) who discuss boyfriends, parenting skills and how to cope with pressure. This is all carried out in front of the camera, and to maintain audience interest, Katona attempts to present a self that is friendly, approachable, likeable and watchable. Katona eventually parted company with her management team, citing differences of integrity as her reason: ‘It was my decision to leave, as on a professional level my career was taking a direction that I did not want, nor did I feel was appropriate. Furthermore, on a personal level, I felt that my

integrity had been compromised' (Katona, June 2011).<sup>39</sup> The decision by Katona to leave her management company left her indebted to them, and the issue of bankruptcy is still present for her, which I feel this shows the intensity of the pressure on “products” such as Katona. This reality show provides an insight into the commodification process endured particularly by women, as they have less control over their own career. It also demonstrates the highly restrictive nature of a career in the media. *Kerry Katona: The Next Chapter* highlights what audiences usually are not able to see – that the process involved in developing a media career is potentially exploitative and that the “product” is carefully monitored and controlled. My research group identified television presenters for discussion who are outwardly successful, inasmuch as their contracts and negotiations with their management are not usually made public. Therefore, the girls in the focus group were mostly unaware of the minutiae of their contracts. Teenage audiences are, however, becoming increasingly familiar with the nature of media agents and management strategies. This awareness is developed through the kinds of self-reflexive reality show described herein, which contributes to how teenage girls create an understanding of women in television. How this kind of knowledge will be reflected in the lives of young women in the future is difficult to assess. As reality shows and access to information about people in the media become more accessible, this must influence how girls view fame and celebrity.

The television presenters I have included in this work contribute their labour to the economic success of many industries, for example the television production company, the lifestyle and celebrity magazines that carry their stories and the manufacturers of the products they promote, to name a few. This contribution needs to be addressed, as does the knowledge and cultural capital of my research group, including how their awareness of the process of production is taken into

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<sup>39</sup> *Daily Mail* Reporter, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2011, “‘I feel my integrity has been compromised’: Kerry Katona hits back at agent as she insists “it was my decision to leave,” available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2005242/Kerry-Katona-hits-agent-insists-decision-leave.html#ixzz1xJ0XXWsT> (accessed May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012).

account in their assessment of these women. To provide an explanation of how these girls acquire an understanding of the women and how this contributes towards their own subjectivities, I need to consider a political-economy perspective. Recent debate has highlighted the “turn” in feminist studies that provides an account of contemporary girlhood and the gendered subject but does not include a political and economic assessment as a tool for analysis. Gill warns of the dangers of excluding the notion of subjectivity as an ideological construct:

I am concerned that we are in danger of throwing out the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, and inadvertently falling back on a curiously a-social concept of subjectivity. A paradoxical aspect of the current “critical” writing on this topic is that it reduces culture to a mere epiphenomenon, rather than seeing it as a collection of practices that can and do have real, material effects (2008, p.434).

What Gill is concerned with is how culture and subjectivity are related and connected. She points out that scholarly work either investigates notions of subjectivity through discursive analysis or it investigates culture as an ideological construct. Few academics present a case for the ways in which ideologies can inform subjectivity, and she suggests that to ignore or side-line the ideological effects of culture is to dislocate from society ideas about the construction of subjectivity. Gill refers to this as ‘a curiously a-social concept of subjectivity’. The idea that the media is responsible for the ways in which we think is a persistent argument in cultural studies and has been overwhelmingly disregarded by scholars because of its over-reliance on the notion of ideological duping as an all-encompassing explanation. Gill makes clear that whilst this model has been discarded because of its reductive and simplistic nature, academics should ‘not abandon the terrain of “culture” altogether’. Therefore, to be able to make some informed assumptions about audiences and subjectivity, it is helpful to consider the “real material effects” of cultural influences.

When I carried out my focus group sessions, I had a very open-ended agenda. I had considered my methodology and decided to facilitate the sessions using a very neutral approach so that I would not influence the contributions made by members of my focus group. In retrospect, I can now piece

together their discussions and apportion them into themes. Some of these themes (economic and cultural) became self-evident once I had completed the transcripts. Had I been able to forecast this prior to undertaking the fieldwork, I may have been more interactive and made some attempt to direct some line of discussion towards themes such as ideology, culture and subjectivity, though this would, however, have changed the methodological approach. Gill (2008, p. 432) suggests that research 'should not retreat from exploring how these broader social/political/economic/cultural discourses and formations may relate to subjectivity', and she goes on to make reference to recent feminist academic work that focuses on the notion of choice and autonomy as an example of the pitfalls involved in side-lining a political economy. She also uses as an example academic accounts that argue that sex workers are exercising choice and autonomy in their lives. Gill is critical of feminist academics that identify sex work as a choice, and she suggests that this exploitative practice does not suggest autonomy by the women involved. She continues by cautioning that feminist politics should be highlighting cultural influences and not ascribing all behaviour to choice and autonomy. The development of my research in this chapter has led me to a broad acknowledgement that political agendas, media institutions and global corporations all contribute to the representations of female television presenters. I am wary of ascribing too much credibility to the way that the media influences teenage girls, and I am critical of the hypodermic effects of critiques that do not allow for alternative ways in which audiences are able to negotiate with a text. However, Gill's point is that it is short-sighted simply to abandon any dialogue with the impact of cultural influences for audiences, and to do so would suggest 'that culture has no effectivity at all' (2008, p.434). Gill recognises that the effects model is simplistic, and therefore scholars must address the issues of cultural influence using more complex tools. To ignore or reject the influence of media images all together would mean that there is no real evaluative relationship between negative representations of culture in the media and negative experiences of people living in that culture. Gill suggests that this would mean we are no longer articulating discussion about the

effectiveness of the media, therefore leaving the cultural landscape open to an interpretation of subjectivity as a-social and not concerned with the real effects: 'Representations matter, I want to contend, and their relationship to subjectivity is too important for critical scholars to ignore – thus leaving it to the individualistic effects paradigm' (2008, p.434).

Gill references Judith Williamson (1986), who cautioned against the trend in academic research that searched out and found ways in which audiences subverted texts. Williamson feared that this idea of an intangible resistance, where academics found that their research revealed empowered and feminist audiences' readings of a text, would replace any call for actual resistance or 'radical political activism' (Gill, 2008, p.436). Like Williamson, Gill is also wary that to move away from, for instance, Marxist accounts of social relations and replace these ideas with the more recent turn to Deleuzian<sup>40</sup> ones in feminist writing, is potentially limiting. The danger is that by giving too much integrity to the notion of autonomy and agency, and then weaving this into the narratives of feminist research, we overinflate the significance and neutrality of autonomy. Gill uses as an example Duits and Zoonen (2006) to illustrate her point. This work considers the wearing of the G-string by young women and also the wearing of the Islamic headscarf, and it suggests that these are outward signs of independence and autonomy on the part of young women. The authors continue by making the assertion that feminist research should be uncritical of these choices and instead be 'respectful of girls' own agency' (2008, p.435). Gill's point here is that we should be wary of attributing all behaviour to the discourse of choice, as she feels it positions these girls (for example) as isolated and fractured from any cultural influences. She also maintains that it is impossible to make reference to the G-string without also including its cultural significance. The idea that we are

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<sup>40</sup> Gille Deleuze (1925-1995), a postmodern French philosopher: 'Delueze denies the unity of the basic subject, seeing Self as a complex of intense Wills, a bundle of desires or multiple subjectivities, that have formed an expanding assemblage, through internal competition and ever shifting dominance. There is no intrinsic ontological unity. He takes up here Nietzsche's idea that being is becoming: there is an internal self-differing within the different itself, the different differs from itself in each case. Everything that exists only becomes and never is'. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/deleuze> (accessed June 2012).

influenced by culture is something to be acknowledged rather than dismissed as too holistic a model of social relations:

Why the emphasis on young women pleasing themselves when the look they achieve – or seek to achieve – is so similar? More fundamentally I wonder what has happened to social theory when simply acknowledging cultural influence is seen as somehow *disrespectful*, and when being influenced is regarded as shameful rather than ordinary and inevitable (2008, p.435)?

Gill's concerns are, I think, well-founded. To set aside the idea that ideology informs our cultural knowledge and understanding in favour of autonomy, choice and individualism is to overlook an opportunity to bring together what Gill terms 'a political economy of theory' (2008, p.436). This theory would allow academics to come to terms with the idea of the autonomous subject without, however, having to forego fundamental, vital and long-established ideas within cultural studies of the nature of political and cultural ideological ideas based on a Marxist-influenced scholarship. For my own study of teenage girls, I would be lacking in a broad understanding of the processes of media consumption if I did not attempt to take into account the cultural capital these girls have accumulated and also how this bank of knowledge has positioned them within a neoliberal landscape and a post-feminist perspective.

Gill suggests that any academic research that focuses on ideas of autonomy and choice is problematic, because these ideas complement rather than criticise neoliberalism and post-feminism. A neoliberal society creates scenarios where individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own lives, using narratives of choice, freedom and self-maintenance. Gill maintains that we are actually presented with very limited opportunities but are given the illusion of choice. Therefore, scholarly research that uses the autonomous subject as an a priori assumption is potentially flawed, because it is not able to take critical issue with the neoliberal model. Gill points out that the deeply problematic notion of subjectivity in a neoliberal society means 'that socially constructed ideas of

beauty or sexiness are internalised and made our own, that is, really, truly, deeply our own, felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours' (2008, p.436).

This is a key point. Without a consideration of how constructed ideals come into being, such as notions of beauty, and how this notion of beauty is accepted on a grand scale by women and men, then any scholarly work cannot critically examine subjectivity.

One of my initial considerations about my focus group was its acknowledgement and acceptance of the economic factors that guide the presenters. The group displayed an underlying sensibility about these female presenters and their behaviour. I suggest that this sensibility is relatively new and in fact a consequence of neoliberalism. An ever-present narrative of choice, individualism and self-improvement means that girls "know" how public relations work to promote people in the media, how much celebrities earn and what kind of decisions are made by their management teams. They are also well aware of how to self-assess against the body images presented in magazines, and they are also aware of how the perfect image has been created for women in the media. This is the result of their familiarity with digital imaging and the manipulation of these images through the practice of airbrushing. Alongside this sensibility is the ever-present danger of the risks involved for themselves and for the women in the media. For teenage girls, these risks are influential because these women are representational. The attachments they form with these presenters are formed because they need indicators or signals for the way in which females have to negotiate the world. Gill suggests that feminist academics need to consider a way of incorporating the cultural influence of social relations, by using a more complex tool than the hypodermic model. She is also wary not to assign too much autonomy to the audience, and she suggests creating a theory using a political economy. I will consider how my understanding of the sensibilities I encountered and describe in my fieldwork fits with this notion of a theory of political economy.



Gill identifies the way that post-feminism and neoliberalism resonate with each other and are able to complement each other's primary concerns. She suggests that these concerns intersect on three levels. Firstly, they both prefer individualism over collectivism. Secondly, neoliberalism and post-feminism persuasively articulate the ideas of self-regulation and free choice as desirable and necessary. Thirdly, and which Gill feels most importantly, women more than men are addressed the most insistently:

To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is *already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects (Gill, 2008, p.443)?

This is of great interest for my understanding of the ways in which my research group is being addressed and its responses to this address. It seems clear that the young girls were aware of some of the ways that cultural social relations “work,” because of their knowingness about significant factors that go towards constructing images of women in the media. The schism appeared to occur when they tried to fit their own understanding of themselves and the ways these women behave within an *already gendered* neoliberal and post-feminist environment. The sense of jeopardy that they displayed towards these women belied the notion that young women are ‘active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subjects of post-feminism’ (2008, p.443). I will explore other work in this area, in order to give me the scope to consider how to apply different conceptual tools to analysing young girls’ relationships with the construction of self, post-feminism and neoliberalism.

### **Feminism, political economy and neoliberalism**

Meehan and Riordan (2002) note the scarcity of feminist scholars working in media economics and political economy as though the two approaches (feminism and economics) are not compatible. Both, however, have an interest in power and are concerned with who has power and how this is distributed. Therefore, an examination of class, capitalism and labour can be used to appreciate how

women's lives are shaped. Riordan asserts that to recognise more fully the nature of consumption in a capitalist society, we have to find a way to critique the forms of pleasure that capitalism produces, by using a political economy perspective. Riordan suggests that the ways in which subjectivity is constructed are both gendered and economic. Providing an economic account of consumption practices will help widen feminist analysis to include an identification of the self as an economic as well as a cultural practice. This means applying the economic implications of cultural consumption to my focus group findings. Their discussions about women on television were clearly a source of pleasure, and connecting these discussions in my analyses to a feminist political economy will contribute to my understanding of their narratives. So far, I have only briefly introduced the issue of the powerful institutions creating the media programmes, or the online environment where blogs, fan sites and forums are found, or the print media where information about television presenters and celebrities are discussed and shared. As Riordan notes:

While women as audience members can and do feel empowered by certain fictional characters and popular cultural icons (and therefore we should acknowledge these moments as something very real and meaningful for women), feminist communication scholars cannot stop our quest for ideological meaning in those instances of empowerment, for restrictive structures remain intact, unquestioned, and often masked by these moments of reprieve. Feminist analyses that look for meaning, yet are void of any historical and political-economic context may serve to validate women's experiences as real, something undeservedly neglected throughout time, but rarely do they change life opportunities for women (2002, p.4).

This approach is of great interest to my research, and on reflection it is the least considered element of my analyses. Whilst it has been a revelation in some respects to hear young teenage girls reflect on their expectations of the women who represent them, none of us exists outside of ideology. As Moleskin (1991) points out, 'we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination' (Modleski, 1991, cited in Gill, 2008, p.436). This may appear a very bleak and reductive perspective in isolation. However, it should be acknowledged that any attempt to provide a vision of how audiences consume media images and create identities must recognise the power and potential of ideological sway.

Riordan (2002, p.8) asserts that it is the role of the feminist political economist to challenge 'consumption practices detrimental to women'. This would therefore suggest that the role of the feminist scholar is to create a mode of inquiry that not only investigates the cultural significance of audience consumption practices, but also sets an agenda for change. In this case, then, it is not enough to identify how teenage girls engage with images of women in the media, but one would also need to identify detrimental practices and make a call for adjustments in those practices. In my exploration of women presenters I have found evidence that some detrimental practices occur. For example, the explanation given by the BBC about why the salaries of the all-female presenting team on *Rip Off Britain* are significantly less than their male contemporaries, is inadequate and untrue:

The BBC said pay depended on factors including "the type of programme someone presents, the time of day it is broadcast and any requirement of specialist knowledge. It is not, however, dependent on age or sex." (Ellicott, 2012).

I will consider the practicality of this call to set an agenda, which will form part of my overall conclusions. On initial consideration it does appear to be fraught with problems: if, as Modleski notes, 'we all exist inside ideology', how then is it possible to identify detrimental practices and then consider how these shape the lived experiences of teenage girls? Riordan asserts that unlike a political economist, a feminist political economist takes as a given that 'capitalism naturalizes male bias because it values traditionally masculine ways of organization and knowing' (Waring, 1988, cited in Riordan, 2002, p.9). This acknowledgement makes space for a 'feminist epistemology that would allow for endless possibilities in understanding and critiquing capitalism' (Riordan, 2002, p.9). However, Riordan, like Gill, is critical of postmodern feminist research that offers an account of subjectivity that is apolitical yet emphasises women's resistance to powerful structures. She also accepts that postmodern feminists are reluctant to accept that women are passive victims of patriarchal ideologies. Riordan suggests a type of compromise through accepting that pleasure is derived from 'globally mediated artifacts' (2002, p.11) and therefore exists through and within

capitalism. To this end, Riordan suggests that feminist political economists establish a dialogue across disciplines, to ‘understand women’s wants desires and needs’ (2002, p.11) and how these work within cultural practices. She suggests that we should acknowledge that pleasure and resistance to dominant ideological ideas can be ‘simultaneously and contradictorily limiting, instead of only beneficial’. This approach by Riordan will help to assuage any concerns I may have about the political vacuity of resistant readings of a text by audiences. It has given me the justification to provide a materialist account of my research findings; however, I am not at present clear on how to create the conceptual tools discussed by Gill earlier in this chapter (see page 126).

Steeves and Wasko (2002, p.27) discuss the possibility of a ‘friendly alliance’ between feminists, cultural studies and a political economy approach, although they do acknowledge the complexity of the task. Finding common ground on which to establish a broad conceptual collaborative base would, they feel, be a progressive move, and they note that that feminism is less concerned with ‘issues of social structure, including capitalism and patriarchy, and more with issues of culture, sexuality, identity and political agency’ (2002, p.25). The authors suggest that there could be a way in which it is possible to theorise the connections between feminists, the political economy and cultural studies. However, they posit that unless questions about how ideology is manifested in material power and the significance of personal agency are broadly addressed, then the different research perspectives will continue to work separately.

Couldry (2010) provides an instructive and comprehensive critique of how the media supports neoliberal values. I would like to explore some of his ideas here, as they complement Gill’s ideas about the compatibility between post-feminism and neoliberalism, noted earlier in this chapter. An exploration of these ideas will assist me in making connections with the political economy of the media and my analyses of the focus group transcripts. Principally, Couldry is concerned with the notion of voice, and he asserts that ‘[w]e are experiencing a contemporary *crisis* of voice, across

political, economic and cultural domains, that has been growing for at least three decades' (2010, p.1). He suggests that neoliberalism is at the heart of the crisis, and one of the prime consequences of this doctrine is that 'it evacuates entirely the place of the social in politics and politics' regulation of economics'. He suggests that re-connecting the "voice" within the social will drive a wedge into neoliberal values and renew the possibilities for alternative politics and a different sociality. Couldry moves on to suggest that the current dominant principle of all neoliberal values is market competition, whereby the social world is made up of opportunities and competition, and that the state is less involved in the development of these opportunities. Consequently, this leaves competitive practices such as trade liberalisation, privatisation of public services and ideas of individualism and self-improvement to become commonly understood and practised as the norm. Therefore, he asserts, neoliberalism is 'better understood as "hegemony"... in short is a "hegemonic rationality"'. Individuals make sense of the world through their knowledge of 'markets, and spaces of potential competition' (2010, p.7). The discourses of individualism, self-improvement and competition clearly resonate with a post-feminist perspective, and it is these conditions that are motivational (and hegemonic) tools for both female television presenters and teenage girls. Couldry comments:

What if, under particular conditions (themselves connected to neoliberalism), the general space for "voice" that mainstream media provides works in important respects to amplify or at least normalize values and mechanisms important to neoliberalism, and by a separate movement, to embed such values and mechanisms ever more deeply within contemporary cultures of governance (2010, p.72)?

Couldry makes reference to reality television, using this as an example of how this genre promotes individualism and self-improvement, thus clearly fitting neoliberal and post-feminist values. These scholarly works are very valuable for me, as I find this consideration of neoliberalism, political economy and the search for new conceptual tools a very difficult area to reconcile. The female television presenters discussed herein are linked strongly to the neoliberal values of market competition, and when they become involved in promoting products such as fashion, it is a sign of

their success and of their popularity with audiences – the market recognises their value, and in turn audiences incorporate their endorsed media status into their understanding and involvement with the television presenter. For example Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby's identification with fashion for *very.com*, increases their value as commodities and also serves to promote a postfeminist account of choice and empowerment. The two presenters are seen to be both creative and opportunistic in that they are providing their fashion ideas and taking advantage of the market place to promote these ideas. They are also engaged in the dialogue of choice and empowerment for their audiences, suggesting that buying their products will improve the lives of girls and take them one step closer to becoming like Cotton and Willoughby's representations of femininity. How much these ideas are taken up by female audiences is at the heart of this research. I will make a proper consideration of these theoretical perspectives in my account in the following chapters.

In this chapter I have attempted to provide an ideological account of female presenters and suggest that they are read as ordinary, lucky and serve as the 'housewife' for the shows they present. These ideologies inform our cultural knowledge and linked with a political economy perspective, where female presenters are commodified, shape the formation of the ideological subjectivities of teenage girls. The following chapter describes how neoliberalism influences the cultural landscape and how, to use an established second wave feminist argument, personal experiences are informed by the political economy.

### The Neo-Liberal Landscape of Contemporary Girlhood

#### Choice, empowerment, sexualisation, equality, liberation and individualism

As we began to see in the previous chapter, these terms are central to the ways in which a post-feminist sensibility is positioned and communicated across media platforms, and they also act as fundamental navigational signposts to the ways in which women can choose to construct notions of the self. In a post-feminist world (where the terms “feminism” and “feminist principles” are represented as outdated and irrelevant), ideas of individualism and self-improvement are constantly reinforced through media images of “empowered women.” The popular assumption amongst some feminist writers is that young girls, unlike their second-wave feminist predecessors, are no longer interested in feminist ideals and principles and that their admiration of celebrity culture precludes their investment in these principles (Walter, 2010; Banyard, 2010; Levy, 2005).<sup>41</sup> Questions around patriarchal oppression, the hyper-sexualisation of young women and dominant ideological notions of the objectification of female bodies – all eschewed by contemporary feminist writers – are not, according to these feminists, even considered by young women. Whilst this may be the case, one of the aims of my research is to examine the ideas young girls articulated through the focus group sessions and to assess the validity of claims that young women are unaware of feminist arguments.

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<sup>41</sup> At the time of writing feminists, Kat Banyard and Anna van Heeswijk were protesting about the opening of a new Playboy club in London.

“When it comes to today’s pornography industry, all roads lead back to Playboy. It was Hugh Hefner who laid the political and cultural groundwork for the brutal, violently misogynist pornography that now floods society.” “Feminists hopping mad over bunny girls,” *Evening Standard* 25<sup>th</sup> May 2011, available at [www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23953402-feminists-hopping-mad-over-bunny-girls.do](http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23953402-feminists-hopping-mad-over-bunny-girls.do) (accessed June 2011)

The recent emerging discipline Girlhood Studies (GHS), articulated in a publication by Claudia Mitchell, Jackie Kirk and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2008), the founding editors of the journal *Girlhood Studies*, offers GHS as a new interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to access what girls think and how they map their own experiences. The journal attempts to map the field of girlhood by reaching beyond the academic community to include the voices and experience of girls as a way of analysing their lives. GHS attempts to conceptualise agency and resistance amongst girls, and in this way it is relevant to the approach I have taken in this research, which seeks to identify how girls speak about the world they live in and how these conversations sit within neoliberalism and post-feminism.

During the course of my research I have been struck by the synchronicity of ideas amongst academics in this area. I was determined from the outset to enable girls' voices to be heard, and so I sought out a method that would most successfully achieve this goal, and Girls Studies appears to have the same objective. Gonick, M., Renold, E. et al. (2009) are contributors to the journal and to Girl Studies as a discipline, and they consider what kind of relationships girls form with the old and new discourses of femininity, asking how or if girls are resistant to the demands of the being a neoliberal subject. They suggest that girls live by a much stricter and narrower set of choices than their predecessors in the 1990s:

While girl power emerged within the economic and social political context of the '90s where girls could be active, in the 2000s they are *expected/demanded* to be fully self-actualized neoliberal subjects (2009, p.2).

Drawing from these ideas and what is expected of the neoliberal subject, I will attempt to posit an interpretation of how girls engage in conversations about their lives through their communal interest in female television presenters. In order to do this, it seemed sensible to consider the driving concerns of the post-feminist phenomenon and to use these as a means of analysing the transcript material with a view to formulating my analysis. The key themes are: choice, empowerment, sexualisation, equality, liberation and individualism.



In this vein, Walter (2010) draws on ideas of empowerment and individualism amongst young women. She specifically considers how they engage with the idea that self-expression through the “perfect body” is a means of articulating independence. Walter suggests that the narrative of empowerment and individualism is present across media platforms and that young women are constantly advised on how to make improvements to their lives through outward signs of “improvement” and the remodelling of their bodies:

The imperative is to better oneself not through any intellectual or emotional growth, but through physical remaking. Such media encourage young girls to believe that good looks rather than good works are at the centre of the good life (2010, p.66).

Walter’s criticism of this form of empowerment is not that it exists but that it focuses relentlessly on outward signs of “improvements,” thus ignoring any intellectual development. Additionally, in much of her work, Gill makes critical reference to the sexualisation of culture across media platforms. She also makes reference to the proliferation of writing, both academic and mainstream, on how female bodies in public spaces are eroticised and made into a spectacle in contemporary culture. She further notes that sexualisation is commercially-driven in the form of specifically targeted children and the Playboy range of children’s clothes and merchandise: ‘The girification of adult women such as Kylie Minogue and Kate Moss is the flip side of media culture that promotes female children as its most desirable sexual icons’ (Gill, 2007, p.257).

Prior to the hyper-sexualisation of culture, the sexualisation of women in media images had been coded passively inasmuch as the representations provided silent and non-responsive images where women were not given opportunities to express themselves except through their bodies. Gill provides a re-examination of this passivity and suggests that contemporary femininity is presented through the idea that women are participatory and ‘active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so’ (2007, p.258).

Crucially, it is this attempt to suggest that a hyper-sexualised representation of contemporary femininity is adopted voluntarily by women that Gill finds more oppressive than traditional ideas of the objectification of women:

I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. In this regime power is not imposed from above or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. We are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography (2007, p.258).

Media texts have for some years bombarded audiences with lifestyle choices through broadcast television programmes such as *Your Face or Mine* (4 Music, 2002). In this show, couples rate their attractiveness in comparison to the studio audience and celebrities. *Music, Money and Hip Hop Honey*s (BBC3, 2011) focuses on girls who want to appear in music videos. *Style Her Famous* (C4 2006- ) is a show in which ‘women who want to tap into the sexiness, glamour, confidence and drive of their favourite celebrities are given a total makeover’ (C4, 2010). Alongside these offerings, magazines, websites, forums, blogs and social networking sites all offer lifestyle choices for audiences. These choices, in turn, offer the opportunity to feel empowered, which is supported by the narratives created by media producers. For example, *Company* magazine’s January 2011 front cover invites readers to ‘Pimp Your Potential’ with ‘Career Changing Advice you’ve never read before’ and suggests ‘Hey, it’s ok to have never had a boyfriend, to be teetotal, to enjoy one night stands’ (Zinio, 2011). Here, the magazine acknowledges the multifaceted nature of its readers and urges us to feel comfortable with the choices we make. The reference to ‘pimp’ anchors the reader’s “potential” for the sex industry and allows the reader to somehow sexualise their choices. The second cover line acknowledges individualism and choice: ‘Hey, it’s ok,’ which in turn reinforces the idea of liberation and equality for the reader. Relevantly, Gill suggests that gender representation in the media:

... includes the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification, the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; the articulation and entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas (Gill, 2007, p.255).

Renata Salecl presents the idea that choice and the notion of choice actually make us more anxious and, in fact, they are tyrannical rather than liberating:

How is it that in the developed world this increase in choice, through which we can supposedly customise our lives and make them perfect leads not to more satisfaction but rather to greater anxiety, and greater feelings of inadequacy and guilt? And why is that in order to alleviate this anxiety people are willing to follow random bits of advice from marketing people or horoscopes, take beauty tips from the cosmetic industry, be guided by economic forecasts from financial advisors and accept relationship advice from the writers of self-help books (2010, p.3)?

For Salecl, choice is an ideological tool of a hyper-consumer society, and this kind of environment raises expectations for individuals by promoting the idea that the pursuit of pleasure and self-improvement is limitless and that they must be sought out and experienced to the absolute. These opportunities for “improvement” are, however, entangled with the weight of responsibility and the fear of making the wrong choice and therefore somehow failing as an individual. Failure and anxiety, according to Salecl, are the ultimate result of the illusion of choice. Salecl (2010, p.49) turns to choice and the cult of celebrity and suggests that they have ‘led countless people to abandon essential elements of their lives in pursuit of an unattainable fantasy’.

Media platforms (broadcast, print, online), to some extent, have democratised opportunities to become famous through reality shows such as *Britain's Got Talent* (ITV, 2007- ). The meteoric rise of Susan Boyle on that show is a testament to the opportunities open to ordinary people to succeed. Celebrities are often presented as “just like us,” particularly in print, where readers can access the ordinary, allowing us to connect and identify with celebrities. Salecl (2010, p.52) uses the term ‘interpassivity’ to explain the relationship between the audience and the celebrity. This refers to the

way that individuals use celebrities as their proxy, someone through whom they can experience life and in whom they can invest:

When it comes to celebrities, some people act outrageously in imitation of those they identify with, while for others the celebrity takes on the proxy role, behaving outrageously so the fan does not have to and can enjoy the vicarious thrill of the celebrity excesses without having to take on any risks involved. To identify with celebrity then, is often not to copy them but rather to assume a kind of distance. A young girl might very well copy what Paris Hilton is wearing while shunning Hilton's lifestyle: Paris Hilton is a proxy who lives a wild, glamorous and damaging life so that the young girl doesn't have to (2010, p.53).

This is an interesting idea for my own work, as it suggests that rather than providing role models, celebrity-watching is a risk-free method of experiencing choices by proxy, which could account for the way in which my focus group discussed the women presenters as if they were "friends." The relationships the girls established are proxies, inasmuch as they can discuss the choices that these women make and assess them against their own understanding of the world and the choices they would make if faced by those circumstances. The focus group members were also able to assess the consequences of the actions of these women and in this way become familiar with how gender relations are played out. I will return to this notion of proxy later in this work.

Media images of "empowered" women are a constant presence, and we are encouraged to use these images as a conceptual tool to evaluate gender equality. At face value, women are represented as empowered, independent and powerful. As Gill suggests:

The growing trend within contemporary advertising to promote products targeted at women using a discourse of empowerment, or what Michelle Lazar (Lazar, 2006: 21) has called "power femininity." This has become almost ubiquitous in affluent developed societies understood as being in a "post-feminist" moment, in which women are invited to purchase everything from bras to coffee as signs of their power and independence (from men) (Gill, 2008, p. 36).

It would appear natural to assume, then, that women have equal access to employment opportunities, and these images are outward signs of parity and gender equality. However, statistics

show that this is far from the truth. For example, between 1995 and 2008, the worldwide proportion of women in parliamentary positions increased by just seven per cent, from 11.3 to 18.3. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has calculated that at the current rate of exchange it will take 200 years to achieve gender parity in the UK parliament<sup>42</sup>. Recent research suggests that 90% of the 1.5 million people suffering from an eating disorder are female (Banyard, 2010, p.15). The Fawcett Society has also produced research describing the gender pay gap:

Nearly forty years on from the introduction of the Equal Pay Act, the gap between women and men's pay is a persistent thorn in the side of workplace equality. In 2009, the UK gender pay gap reduced from 17.1% to 16.4%. However, the pay gap persists and rises to an astonishing 55% in the financial services industry (Fawcett Society, 2011).<sup>43</sup>

Research carried out in 2007 showed:

The Price Waterhouse Coopers research found that amongst FTSE 350 companies in 2002 almost 40% of senior management posts were occupied by women. When that research was repeated in 2007, the number of senior management posts held by women had fallen to just 22% (Walters, 2010, p.10).

These figures show a dislocation in terms of media representations of women and equal opportunities. Whilst it is possible to highlight here the lack of fit, what is important to focus on is the effect that these images and figures have on teenage girls. As discussed in the previous chapter, I am looking for a way forward that does not exclude the ideological sway of media images on audiences; however, as Gill (2008) suggests, there needs to be a more nuanced and complex tool than the hypodermic needle approach that includes the cultural influences of a political economy. I have chosen to organise my analysis of the transcripts material in a way that attempts to contribute towards this and the themes I have identified are a contributory factor. It is essential to ground this work in what girls actually have to say, and the themes described above do not always reveal the whole story. What is lacking is attention to the more difficult underside of feminine experiences in

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<sup>42</sup> Sex and Power, 2008, (pdf) Equality and Human Rights Commission, available at [http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/sex\\_and\\_power\\_2008\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/sex_and_power_2008_pdf.pdf) (accessed January 2010).

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=1022>

the neoliberal and post-feminine climate, which often have a more negative emotional experience attached, as identified by Gill (2008). It is therefore important to pay attention to this point, in order to access the nuanced method for which Gill calls. The themes that emerge in this context, then, are **disparagement**, **affectionate disparagement** and **knowingness**. This next section turns to these concepts, and again these themes are grounded in what the focus group actually had to say and also serve to illustrate the value of my methodological framework.

## **Disparagement, Affectionate Disparagement and Knowingness**

From studying the transcripts (Appendix B) and mapping them against the terms discussed, I found it necessary to expand the range of thematic descriptions and have therefore included the terms **disparagement**, **affectionate disparagement** and **knowingness**. These additional terms account for the ways in which girls negotiate with images of women on screen. Disparagement, from the group perspective, occurs through measuring the presenters against the “correct behaviour” and then how any “incorrect behaviour” is acceptable (affectionate disparagement) or unacceptable (disparagement) for the audience. The focus group made constant references to how media industries shape the actions of the media figure; for example, the group set “fakeness” as a measure of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. If the group established that a presenter was insincere, then the mechanisms of the production process became transparent to them through comments such as ‘I think she’s trying to make too much of a statement with clothes like that’ (Sophie) and ‘she’s a try-hard’ (Lornette). Both comments establish that the group recognised how the presenter was “speaking” to them by trying too hard, and all the members of the group expressed knowingness and responded negatively. This kind of judgement was typical of the group; when they suspected insincerity, they were less attached and responded less favourably to the presenter. This perhaps reveals something about the experience of living in a neoliberal and post-feminist culture.

This triad of negotiation and accountability set against a neoliberal perspective is, I think, actually a complex system of checking and measuring against the young female audience's expectations of women in the media. For example, in a conversation about how the group was often critical of female presenters, Julie commented 'You're critical because they're representing you'. This comment suggests a relationship between the audience and presenters that is not aspirational, as I had initially considered, but rather representational. This means that the girls were not looking for role models to imitate; instead, they were assessing and checking the behaviour of these women as a way of understanding the world they live in and the ways in which women are able to negotiate this world. When presenters displayed behaviour the group did not approve of, such as insincerity, appearing drunk in public or creating an overly sexualised image, the group was disparaging and actually quite angry at the betrayal: 'She used to be, like, the girl next door, then as soon as she started attracting some male attention... she just changed' (Julie on Holly Willoughby).

Disparagement was reserved for presenters who had overstepped the mark. However, a more toned down, affectionate form of disparagement occurred when the group established the sincerity and well-meaning nature of the presenter. This was seen when Rachel remarked, 'She's such a tart' in a gently mocking way about Davina McCall's appearance in a bikini on *Big Brother*.

## Method

In formulating my analytical framework, I have attempted to organise the transcript material with reference to the themes outlined above as a means of grappling with the complexities of post-feminism. However, throughout, my analysis has been motivated by my own experiences of working as a co-traveller with the girls in my group. Here, my approach is informed by the work of Helen Wood. Although her work focuses primarily on television talk shows and how audiences use

talk to formulate mediated social relationships, Helen Wood (2009) also uses focus groups and develops a 'text-in-action method' to analyse her findings. Wood suggests that watching talk television is a dynamic process whereby the act of watching and "talking" to the television creates a space for the reception of the media texts to be temporal and not fixed in meaning via the institution that created the text:

I want to make clear that this approach to audience research does not register "talking back" in and of itself as oppositional; the business of interaction is always bound up within complex power relations. Rather it suggests that a focus on communicative action might offer a different route towards analysing the role of television within the dynamic business of meaning making and power relations in daily life (Wood, 2009, p.6).

Wood's text-in-action methodology is important here, as it allows for the ethnographer to 'look for the determinate moments' (2009, p.108) in the audience's consumption of media texts. This includes the utterances, silences and sounds that occur when focus groups watch television clips and how then the researcher can use these responses to identify how audiences create meaning from these texts. Rachel's comment on Davina McCall ('She's such a tart') was followed by laughter from the group. My understanding of that laughter is that it was well-meaning and affectionate. The comment was prefaced by complete silence in the group as they watched, checked and assessed McCall's body in the bikini. Some conversation developed around her hair, too – 'Look at her roots in that' (Sophie) – and another statement about the shape of her body from Colette – 'Why is her stomach that shape?' followed by a defensive reply from Rachel, 'Because she works out; I get that when I exercise, everybody does'. Because McCall somehow passed that "test" for this group, there were no disparaging responses to her appearance in a bikini. I will attempt to explore the exact nature of approval and disapproval in the analysis of the transcripts in the following chapter.

Wood offers an alternative approach to analysing how texts and audiences interact. However, she is not suggesting we abandon the 'complex power relations' of the production process but posits that



the moment of viewing is also key to the ways in which identity is established over time. Specifically, Wood is concerned with the individual and collective actions, utterances and non-verbal communication that occur during the viewing process. The overarching imperative for Wood in this research is to examine contemporary theories on the media's role in developing and shaping communities and individual notions of self within post-industrial society. Wood suggests that individualisation and self-reflexivity are the key terms used to describe the political direction of neoliberalism, aided by media institutions, platforms and programming. However, she suggests that these practices are generally deemed to uproot traditional identity formations, made for example through gender and class, whereas the findings here demonstrate how those "older" identities can be multiplied rather than "freed" through a particular form of mediated self-reflexivity and self-government. Thus, this work illuminates the site of gendered domesticity as it is mediated in modernity, drawing attention to the mechanics that impel that process. By viewing practices at work as 'texts in-action' (2009, p.7), we might take some small steps towards a fuller understanding of the more intricate parts the media plays in the "drive belts" of social change. By extrapolating from Wood's work, my own research attempts to formulate a method for working with focus groups by sharing the act of viewing and noting the ways in which links to the post-feminist sensibility I have been describing emerge for me as the researcher in this encounter.

Through the employment of the text-in-action method, Wood is proposing a more complete picture of how the media is implicated in creating meaning, and more importantly what kinds of communications are formed and acted out in the process of watching daytime television talk shows, referred to by Wood as 'the site of gendered domesticity' (2009, p.7). What she adds here is the notion of social change. By creating an ethnographic space and methodology to examine the act of viewing, her work provides an opportunity to consider how social change is orchestrated by the media. It is this notion of social change that has broadened my own imperative within my research,

to create some kind of argument for the process of understanding how media images are understood. Wood notes:

In my study, the actual moments of viewing are essential to capturing the communicative event of the *text-in-action* with its audience. Therefore while my interviewees do talk about the text, this research also gets a stage closer to the act of viewing. What happens as the women watch the television programme? Is it possible to observe and pay close attention to the text/speaker and the reader/hearer union? Thus, as with the textual analysis, the audience research does not conform to the encoding/decoding process where symbolic meaning is constructed and deconstructed as a dual process that is separately conceived (2009, p. 105).

Wood draws on and acknowledges Valerie Walkerdine's (1986) research through a family viewing the film *Rocky II*, by making reference to the act of viewing and the kinds of responses that her audience generated. In Walkerdine's transcripts, she provides a description of the actions of the viewers of the film: 'F pauses video or winds back to the closing round, because M is handing out the tea and cakes' (Walkerdine, 1986, cited in Wood, 2009, p.107). Wood identifies the importance of describing the action and then draws on this to create her own text-in-action method:

Would Walkerdine have got such a close evaluation of Mr Cole's identification with Rocky had she not charted the viewing experience in such a way? Had she simply asked Mr Cole what he thought about the film after the event, he is likely to have articulated such a relationship with the fight scenes that could have been understood in any other way than pleasure in the spectacle of the event (Wood, 2009, p.108).

Similarly, for my research, I have drawn on Wood's work, as this method opens up a rich avenue of investigation, because it is the utterances and non-verbal responses of my focus group that were, for me, initially difficult to categorise and incorporate into my findings. There were positive and negative responses to the screen images during my focus group research (verbal and non-verbal), where the group "talked back" to the television presenters, which formed a significant part of the transcripts. The text-in-action method has become crucial for my analysis. Wood suggests that audiences may find it difficult to reflect on their responses to media texts, and therefore any

responses a researcher may elicit may be limited, whereas employing the text-in-action method would potentially be more fruitful.

During my own initial research I immediately understood the difficulty of asking subjects to respond to images of women television presenters. The problem often lies in the subjects' willingness to be prompted or to look for a structure within which to respond. For example, if a teenage girl is asked to talk about women presenters, they almost immediately begin to talk about role models, media influence and any media-related arguments that they have read about in newspapers, magazines, etc., as they feel that this is what is "expected." Text-in-action is a method that allows the researcher to look at the experiences of the focus group when watching and discussing images of women. Wood makes reference to Hermes' (1995) work on magazine readers, and whilst Hermes had stated that not all magazine reading experiences are 'meaningful' (Hermes, 1996, cited in Wood, 2009, p.108), Wood suggests that because Hermes interviewed her subjects and took these responses as her findings for analysis, she may have overlooked any potentially meaningful actions: 'Just because everyday media is not necessarily registered as meaningful by its consumers, we should not conclude it is not meaningful at all' (Wood, 2009, p.108).

In discussing her methodology, Wood considers how her work contributes to feminist research. She points out that, traditionally, feminist research attempts to bring into focus the 'marginalised voices of women in an attempt to evaluate practices and pleasures that have been previously excluded from serious critical concern within the male dominated academe' (2009, p.110). Wood refers to the post-structuralist notions of gender and media consumption such as those discussed by Ang and Hermes (1996), who argue against any assumptions that gender is a fixed category. They also assert that research has focused consistently on women's media consumption as if gender is clearly determined. Wood calls for a move in feminist media studies to 'test subjectivity as an unfinished process in which gender is constantly in flux as an unstable category' (2009, p.111), and

she uses Judith Butler (1990) to support her imperative. Butler maintains that gender is not fixed but constantly fluid and that living through gender is an act of ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ (Butler, 1990, cited in Wood, 2009, p.111). For Wood, therefore, the act of watching television, for her focus group, is a process by which the group can enact gender:

Central to my position is Butler’s emphasis upon the dynamism of the process of gender enactment: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable entity or a locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts... This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality” (Wood, 2009, p.111).

As a useful comparison to my own work, Bainbridge and Yates (2010) use interview material to interrogate how masculinity is mediated through the DVD collections of their male participants. Of principal importance for my research here is that the participants did not think of themselves as fans and preferred to position themselves as having a ‘more discerning relationship to media consumption’ (Bainbridge and Yates, 2010, p.13). My initial interest in teenage girls and their relationship with television presenters was instigated by their reluctance to see themselves as fans in the same way that they were fans of musicians or film stars. Consequently, this work on “not being a fan” may provide some access to how girls actually negotiate familiar images of women on the television screen. Additionally, Bainbridge and Yates consider the notion of the transitional object and suggest that the act of DVD collecting creates a transitional space for men to explore issues of their own masculinity within a social environment:

The emphasis here on the way in which such objects appear to be “personalised” is of interest. The push/pull dynamic of fetishism is clearly at work here. However, there is also a more nuanced reflexive understanding of the processes involved. Thus, while many of our interviewees expressed the importance of the aesthetic appeal of DVDs in contributing toward their desire to purchase them, it is interesting that an important part of their motivation for purchase was to use the DVDs as a mean of relating to other men, which included friends and family. The DVD, then, becomes an object not only of individual consumption, but also one that facilitates interaction between men, thereby enabling new spaces for the exploration of subjectivity between them (2010, p.15).

My observation of teenage girls is that, like the men in Bainbridge and Yate's research, they use stories about television presenters to establish specific friendships with other girls (as they reserve these gendered conversations for other girls). The ability to discuss these issues with some authority establishes them as part of a community and creates a mode of communication through which they can be "understood" by one another. As I mentioned earlier in this work, the focus of my research came about due to conversations with teenage girls in my classes. The girls appeared to be particularly interested in the lives of female television presenters; some expressed their desire to be a presenter, but mostly they were very engaged and absorbed by the life stories of these women. They also discussed them as if they were friends; for example, they would spend time commenting on how they thought these presenters should deal with particular issues revealed about them in celebrity magazines.

My work has been usefully informed by the approach of Wood, as discussed above, which was important in shaping the context of the decisions I made about how to work with my focus group. The focus group sessions were between approximately one and two hours long and were loosely structured, by which I mean that I had recorded a number of clips of television presenters to use as a stimulus for discussion and had become familiar with the news stories surrounding them. I attended a conference where Joke Hermes<sup>44</sup> urged ethnographic researchers to use self-reflexive techniques. She suggested that we take our findings back to our audience for feedback, as quite often ethnographic research is not fed back to the audience. Hermes asserted that there is a rich vein of potential self-reflection by the group and that by using the "co-travellers" approach (discussed earlier in this work) with our research group, we should make opportunities for the members of our groups to reflect and contribute on a number of occasions. Acting on this

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<sup>44</sup> Joke Hermes was one of the keynote speakers at the Transforming Audiences Conference, University of Westminster, London, 2005.

imperative, in the final session I showed the group the PowerPoint I had created as a presentation for my PhD upgrade, which contained quotations from the girls from the two previous sessions. This proved to be reasonably fruitful inasmuch as the girls were able to reflect on their comments from earlier sessions. However, for me it was a hesitant session, as I feel I was not as prepared as I could have been due to the ad hoc nature of the responses. The problem appeared to be that the session became almost too reflexive and I had not anticipated how engrossed they would become in seeing their own words on a PowerPoint. This became difficult for me to transcribe later, as the group were all talking at the same time and mostly about their own words on screen. Moreover, they became preoccupied by their contribution to the earlier sessions and then lacked concentration for the final session.

For future reference, I would still include an opportunity for self-reflection. However, I would be mindful of the dangers and perhaps apply a more structured organisation to the session. In this session, there would be a definite end to the reflexive section and a clear move forward to further observations. I think this is one of the dangers of familiarity with a group. Had I been an external visitor to the college, I think the focus group may have been less relaxed in my presence and perhaps more inclined to stay focused. Also, whilst I had found Hermes' advice to take our findings back to our research groups intriguing, on reflection I was really unprepared when I did this and was not really sure what to expect or how to carry this out. This resulted in me controlling a significant part of the final session, and it almost became a taught session where I "lectured" the students through the PowerPoint. As such, the relationship shifted back to teacher/student and left them feeling a little unsure of how to respond. After a period of time the group members found their feet and began to respond as they had done in previous sessions, and I think I had learnt a valuable lesson in research methodology.

Feminist accounts of the landscape and environment for contemporary girlhood, discussed in this chapter, have given me a useful and informative guide and point of reference from which I can map the focus group findings. In the next chapter, I will attempt to make some kinds of connections and comparisons to explore how young women negotiate this environment and more importantly how aware they are of the terms and conditions identified herein. In other words, what does it look like from the perspective of a young teenage girl?

### **Girls' talk – Focus Group Transcripts**

#### **'You're critical because they're representing you'.**

The following transcripts have been grouped into the themes discussed in the previous chapter.

There is on one occasion some inevitable ambiguity around the complex notion of disparagement and affectionate disparagement. I have tried, where possible, not to repeat any dialogue, although on occasions the sentences may be repeated where they are relevant to more than one theme. I have provided a brief description of the scenario, to locate the reader. To clarify, the transcripts are not addressed as a linear dialogue; they are themed so that they travel between sessions. Adapting Wood's text-in-action method, I have placed a description of the tone of voice used where the sentence needed further explanation and where the description supports my argument. I have also added bold to the text where the group were emphatic in their description. The sessions were recorded for audio, and for each session I provided soft drinks and snacks. In this way I was able to establish for the group the difference between lectures delivered by me and these sessions, in an attempt to eliminate any idea that the sessions would be teacher-led. By providing drinks and snacks a different tone and relationship was established and the group was more inclined to speak freely and also take charge of the discussions.

The girls became very territorial around the sessions, and if we were accidentally interrupted, they would usher the intruder out of the room so that we could continue. This was particularly noticeable if the interrupter was a male student. The group members took obvious pleasure in their allegiance to this group and they also enjoyed the fact that it was restricted to females. Like ethnographers before me (described in Chapter 1), I considered that this pleasure in belonging to a



group would influence the importance they placed on television presenters, because I had legitimised their interests. However, this was an unavoidable consequence of my methodology. By the final session they had become familiar with the format, the structure and the content, and they remained interested in discussing television presenters throughout; however, towards the end of our final session, there were signs that they were losing interest in the project, as they tended to wander off topic on several occasions. In my estimation, the interest they had shown in the project had run its course. Had I asked them to attend a fourth session they might not have been willing to commit their time. This is, I suggest, evidence of their transience with the subject matter. Although my research findings reveal some fascinating and illuminating ways that girls negotiate with media texts, they are merely a portrait of a particular time and place. It would be of great interest to me to be able to reconnect with this group and find out their thoughts some years later. This is something to consider for future research.

I have anonymised the names of the participants; however, pseudonyms have been used, as this allows the reader to track and attribute the responses to each focus group member.

## Disparagement

*The group is watching a clip of Kate Thornton presenting The X Factor (ITV); she was subsequently fired from the show.*

**Sophie** Oh, I hate her! She's so annoying, no wonder she got kicked off the *X Factor*.  
(Dismissive).

**Lornette** She's so, like, I'm so [the] girl next door, I'm so, like, real and **she's not!** (Angry).

**AWY** What's not real about her?

**Julie** I just want to punch her! (Scornful).

**Sophie** When she came on and she clapped, like [mimes clapping], she's just so over the top.

**Get** over yourself! (Scornful)

**Colette** Do you know why she got kicked off the *X Factor*?

**Julie** Because she was crap.

**Danni** She wanted more pay.

**Julie** More **pay**, for **that?! She doesn't do anything!** (Incredulous).

This exchange, for me, indicates clearly that this presenter is not ordinary enough for the group.

This is emphasised by Kate Thornton apparently asking to be paid more for her high-profile role as presenter of *X Factor* (ITV, 2004). This television show regularly attracts average viewing figures of 15.5 million (however I could not find through research any evidence of Thornton requesting a salary increase). Whilst not disputing the success of the show, or the high-profile nature of Thornton's role, the group critically examines the presenter for her actions. The issue here appears to be Thornton's sense of entitlement, and in some way the group has placed limits on this presenter's success. This directly contradicts notions of choice and empowerment discussed earlier in this work, as Kate Thornton is being criticised here for attempting to exploit her opportunities. As I suggested earlier, Thornton creates anxiety for the group through her behaviour. She is confident in her worth as a television presenter, which is evidenced by her "request" for an increased salary. The derision and incredulity displayed by Julie also derides Thornton's actual role as a presenter through the comment 'She doesn't do anything'. This expression of derision leads me back to an earlier discussion about ordinary and extraordinary behaviour displayed by female presenters. It also suggests that, ultimately, the group members do not see television presenting as a credible role, which refers back to my earlier discussion in Chapter 2 on the representation of women, beginning with breakfast television. The trivialisation of this genre and subsequent genres in which women presenters work, contributes to the ways in which girls experience ideas about a woman's place and their own subjectivity. The implication here is that ordinary women are not

expected to be self-seeking – they are expected to wait be rewarded and given approval by an external body. This resonates with McRobbie's (2001) notion of the 'good girl', Gill's notion of 'punitive regulation' and Couldry's (2010) notion of a neoliberal rationality that challenges 'voice'. It also resonates with Bennett's notion of talent, in which he suggests that 'the narrative forms of television celebrity... tend to elide questions of hard work or talent' (2011, p.35) All of these ideas suggest that we are as subjects excessively monitored and regulated through hegemonic discourses. This group's dialogue demonstrates both their knowledge of the rules of what is expected of women and also their anxiety when these rules are transgressed.

The group also understands that the role of a presenter is not regarded as having a high cultural value, and therefore it can easily be subject to derisory judgements. For Kate Thornton, then, attracting attention to the role and to her situation is asking for trouble. That Thornton was sacked by *The X Factor* is proof that the group's anxiety is justified. I suggest that these girls "know their place", which is a limiting factor in the construction of their own subjectivity.

The idea of women in "their right place," and the anxiety that this creates, is central to this work. It is, as I have suggested here, one of the indicators of the post-feminist and neoliberal landscape. Gill (2008, p.441) makes a connection between post-feminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity by positing that this connection can be identified on three levels. Firstly, individualism has replaced sociality, secondly post-feminism is 'constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas' (2008, p.443) and thirdly, neoliberalism invites women (more than men) to behave as self-regulating and self-transforming individuals who see their life choices as freely made. To this end, Gill asks 'could it be that neoliberalism is *always already gendered*, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?' The contradictions that young girls experience through their surveillance of themselves, each other and women in the media are difficult to reconcile, something on which Gill:

On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of “can do” girl power, yet on the other their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects; on the one hand, women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedence (2008, p.442).

I suggest that the responses of the group to Thornton in some way mirror this ‘hostile surveillance’, in that it is narrated by the group into a discourse of betrayal. Thornton is accused of pretending to be the “girl next door,” but she is not believed, as she is far too obviously invested in the financial rewards of fame. This is an interesting judgement, as the group’s relationships with these women appear to be established by the perceived ordinariness of the presenter. The kinds of jeopardy involved in primetime television, such as competing in a male-dominated space, threatens this relationship, and the idea that women are empowered and create their own choices and opportunities is unsubstantiated in this instance. Furthermore, there is a lack of investment amongst the focus group in the popular assumptions that choice and empowerment are actually genuinely available to women.

Turning for a moment to McRobbie (2004), she suggests that the popular conception, particularly within media discourses, is that ‘feminism is taken into account’ (2004, p.5). By this she means that the term “feminism” is redundant amongst young women – the assumption being that feminism as a political movement is no longer part of the female vocabulary. Popular culture has set about undoing a feminist imperative for change with such subtlety that feminist principles are not so much ignored as presented ironically. Feminism is reinvented as an archaic term and is replaced by post-feminist and neoliberal notions of individualism:

We would also need to be able to theorize female achievement predicated not on feminism, but on female individualism, on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy (McRobbie, 2004, p.7).

None of the young teenagers I have interviewed or held a conversation with over the ten years has ever been comfortable with the words “feminism” or “feminist.” This unease contributes to McRobbie’s assertion that feminism ‘is taken into account’, inasmuch as young girls cannot relate to the term. What the unease also suggests is that young girls may not understand why they are uncomfortable. Has a post-feminist and neoliberal perspective been so effective that they are embarrassed by the use of the word in conversation? What is becoming increasingly apparent in my research (and is evidenced in McRobbie’s work) is that there is a lack of fit between what young women are expected to become, namely ‘free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects’ (McRobbie 2004:7) and what they feel able to become. McRobbie (1996) identifies a crisis and tension in the way that young women are being addressed through magazines: ‘They also speak of crisis, or at least tension, in what it is to be a woman now’ (1996, p.178). I see the responses by my research group as evidence of a deepening crisis. Their anxiety for the women on screen and in turn for themselves becomes apparent, and the group’s tendency to disparage in this way is symptomatic of this crisis.

The group made constant references to women in the media becoming too involved with their own media personas, describing them as “fake.” This term is used by the group when they suspect that a female in the media is not behaving genuinely, and it is articulated most strongly when they see women behaving in an overly sexual manner or “showing off” in a male-dominated environment. An argument worth pursuing here is that the group’s disparagement of these women could be interpreted as providing a type of armoury against the women’s potential failure as privileged subjects in the media. This in turn is reflected back onto the group as collective failure for themselves and, in this interpretation, could be “sisterly” in intent. By “sisterly” I mean there is a barely conscious acknowledgement of the collectiveness of failure as a gender, though this may be an over-complication of the disparagement process; however, it is a notion worth pursuing for its

positive and feminist implications. What has become apparent is the sense of anxiety sometimes displayed throughout these transcripts. Turning to recent work on this matter, Bainbridge (2013) examines the notion of the way women use disparagement, by exploring the disapproving way that women journalists report in their columns on other women. Bainbridge (2013, p.220) suggests that the disparaging tone is evidence of the ‘failures of our culture adequately to embrace the gains that feminism can be seen to have made’. She has identified some very relevant processes involved in a post-feminist culture that may help to unravel some of the comments made by the group. I would like to extrapolate some of these ideas throughout this chapter and consider how they match my understanding of the group’s use of disparagement and work against the other themes identified.

*Watching Davina McCall, presenter of Big Brother (C4), and discussing her television advert for Garnier Nutrisse hair dye.*

**Sophie** You know, the thing that makes her worse is that advert she’s in for hair dye.

**Lornette** Oh my god, when she says “No, Mum”! (Reference to TV ad for hair dye).

**Julie** Yeah, that just made her go... (mimes going down).

**All** Yeah.

**Danni** And she wants to be an actress? It’s not going to happen. (Decisively).

**AWY** How do you know she wants to be an actress?

**Danni** Because she sacked her agent.

**AWY** Where did you read that?

**Danni** Newspaper...

**AWY** Do you think she really does home dye her hair?

**All** **No!** (Loudly).

**Julie** Don’t be silly! (Scornful).

The group on the whole approves of Davina McCall, as I have observed in other conversations, except when she presents an image of herself in which they cannot invest. The main problem appears to be that the group distrusts the presenter in this instance, and her appeal has “gone down” because she is part of the bigger corporate beauty business. The dialogue, ‘No, Mum’, appears to create disapproval because of its lack of believability. As a result of this initial mistrust, McCall’s attempt at becoming an actress is then also subject to disapproval, perhaps because it would make her less ordinary and less able to be “like a friend.” The conversation continues to disparage women who try to convince them of their sincerity, and the group is eager to create a narrative of insincerity around Eva Longoria, one of the stars of US television show *Desperate Housewives* (US, ABC, 2004-2012). Again the fame surrounding this show does not convince the group of Longoria’s honesty:

**Danni** It’s like Eva Longoria! You can’t exactly see her staying in on Friday nights dying her hair, can you?

**Colette** And do you think she actually eats Magnum?

**Rachel** The tooth mark that’s in it, she didn’t bite it! (Accusatory).

**All** She didn’t bite it! (Emphatic).

**Colette** You know when she did that Sensations advert – you know when she eats them she spat them back out, she won’t actually eat them! (Conclusive).

**Sophie** That’s pathetic! (Scornful).

Here, the issue is about trust and expectation. The group’s preferred understanding of this narrative is that this is true, based on little evidence except Colette’s word. For the group the probability that this actually happened is high because of their distrust of the advertising industry and, by inference, Longoria’s involvement in that industry. The group’s expectations of media figures, when exposed and linked with a political economy, are discredited, and an element of distrust and disinvestment in

their media status occurs. The group's understanding of the market (media figures, advertising and large corporations) is either very sophisticated, in that they see through the advertising strategy, or they are defensively weary (and therefore cynical) of attempts to persuade them that, in this case, a stereotypically perfect woman like Eva Longoria would eat something as "forbidden" as chocolate. Quite clearly they have not invested in the marketing strategy for *Magnum* ice-cream and are scornful of anyone who would do so.

This discussion involves high energy from the group. They are all emotionally charged in their accusations, and I think this is important to observe, as the intensity of their frustration with examples of insincerity is very evident through their tone. (This would not be as apparent through an analysis of the words alone, which is evidence of the success of the text-in-action method).

The following conversation about Charlotte Church also has a disparaging tone, because Church 'tries too hard'. Unlike McCall and Longoria, Charlotte Church is presenting herself as an anti-authority figure by her "scandalous" behaviour. Church hosted her own show (*The Charlotte Church Show*, Channel 4, Monkey Kingdom Productions 2006-2008) and was criticised frequently by the press and the public; in fact, viewers complained to Channel 4 that the programme was 'coarse, crude and filthy' and that Church was 'out of her depth' (Beckford & Tapper, 2006).

**Lornette** Like, Charlotte Church, she tries to be so outrageous all the time.

**Sophie** Who's this?

**Lornette** Charlotte Church.

**Colette** I've never even watched her show, I just turn it off.

**Lornette** She's always, like, "I'm so scandalous"! (Sarcastic tone).

All Laugh



Clearly the group is unwilling to believe the honesty of this presenter, as her efforts are regarded with suspicion and she is dismissed as unwatchable. The group displays very little interest in Charlotte Church and she is disregarded almost immediately without any obvious signs of engagement through either dialogue or tone of voice. Interestingly, she displays very “unfeminine behaviour” on her show, for example by swearing, making constant references to sex and setting up and delivering practical jokes, which involve a slapstick style of humour – all of which she displays with a “gameness” that is more usually part of a male presenter’s style of delivery. For the group, Charlotte Church, because of this behaviour, is instantly categorised as “not real.” Perhaps Church has not displayed an acceptable balance of femininity, honesty and ordinariness for the group. The group members are possibly influenced by their own backgrounds and regionalism, while Church is very vocal about her Welsh background and culture, which is somewhat different to their own regional (Surrey) sensibility. Reviews of the show were not always complimentary, which may also have some bearing on their reaction. Church has also been photographed regularly by the national press and vilified for her apparently scandalous behaviour. In terms of the notion of jeopardy I discussed in earlier chapters, Church is at risk from “outside” sources, by which I mean the masculine world of the press, critical reviews and, on the larger scale, patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, she is vilified in the press for her behaviour, and the “good girl” in each member of the research group understands why she is vilified. The sense of jeopardy and risk Church displays incurs the disapproval of the dominant ideological apparatus, which is too overwhelming for the group, as there are too many disapproving discourses to negotiate, and so they dismiss her without discussion. This is the safest course of action, as Church has not demonstrated the right balance of femininity, sincerity and mindfulness of the jeopardy involved in this vilification by the press. Therefore, the group is dismissive and disapproving of her. Bainbridge provides an account of the consequences of the ways women are constantly disparaged that can be usefully employed here:

What is more, when the lives of such women come under pressure, media attention renders them into pitiful figures of loss and despair and, for media consumers, the weight of their public presence becomes perhaps unbearable as a consequence (2013, p.228).

In this instance, the group finds Charlotte Church's behaviour "unbearable" and are so dismayed by her that they cannot articulate their revulsion beyond a few words. Similarly, the reality television contestants who appear on other shows are exposed and disparaged for 'playing games':

**Julie** Chanelle, out of *Big Brother*, and she was saying, "Who's Osama, who's Osama?" It's just stupid.

**Sophie** He's in the newspaper, like, **every week!**

**Julie** And do you know what? If I was Victoria Beckham I would be offended that girl wanted to be like me, because she is **so** stupid!

**Lornette** But really, a lot of them are that stupid!

**Sophie** Some of them are playing games though.

**Julie** That's what I mean – they think if I act stupid then people will laugh at me, and actually we're laughing **at you** because we can't believe how dumb you are. (Scornful).

The group is vigilant in their assessment of real and false when they appear in the media. Here they assume that the reality television contestants are involved in a fairly transparent attempt to exploit their new-found media status. It is the exposure of the mechanics of the production that wins the disapproval of the group, alongside a rejection of the negative stereotypes that this engenders.

Victoria Beckham in this instance is, by comparison, a "real" celebrity and Chanelle has revealed her desire to emulate Victoria Beckham. This is deemed offensive by Julie, because Chanelle 'is so stupid' and by implication not a real media figure. Playing games and appearing stupid is particularly disliked and creates mistrust for the group. These images of women on screen are seen as representational for the group, and the very act of watching a female behave insincerely is, I think, a cause of embarrassment for the group. These women are attempting to be visible on television for

the wrong reasons; pretending to be stupid is as comparable a crime as actually being stupid. What is evident in this group's assessment of the women on television is that they admire women who are able to prove their intelligence. Their acknowledgement of successful women – Katie Price and Sharon Osborne, for example – focuses on their strengths as businesswomen, a point I shall explore later.

*On Jade Goody*

**Julie** Sleeping with a footballer and making racial comments on *Big*

*Brother* – that's all she's famous for and she gets publicised and magazines, like...

**Lornette** I know this sounds horrible, but I know she died and I know she had kids, but she didn't do anything in her life to help anyone.

**Sophie** No.

**Rachel** (laughs) She made a fitness video. (Sarcastic tone).

All laugh

These comments are very disparaging and are an indication of the group's lack of investment in Jade Goody as a media figure, because the mechanics of achieving fame are transparent and the difference between fame and notoriety is highlighted negatively: 'Sleeping with footballers and making racial comments' is disparaged for the superficiality of Jade Goody's intentions. Making a fitness video is a joke enjoyed by the entire group because of its seemingly obvious attempts to reap financial rewards from fame, which is a common criticism of media figures. This is again more evidence of their sophisticated/weary disavowal of the market. Despite being addressed by the media, they are clear that they are not taken in by this address, and consequently they respond negatively. This disavowal, however, is transitory and selective. The group's conversations around a presenter's dramatic story indicate that it is usually always believed; to some extent this might be attributed to their teenage years and their keen sense of drama:

**Julie** ... on the BBC they did this advert and it's, like, for *The Culture Show* and it's, like, talking about what they think culture is, and fair enough they have people like Ricky Gervais so it's not, like, real intellectuals like Bill Gates or whatever. But they've got Danielle Lloyd on there and she's, like, yeah, I don't really know what it is. Of course she bloody wouldn't, **cos you're stupid!** But why do they have her on there? Do you know what I mean? It's just... (Anxious, voice trails off).

Clearly this disparagement extends to women who are not “in their right place.” For example, appearing on highbrow shows about culture means that Danielle Lloyd is exposing herself to being understood as fake and lacking intelligence. The question Julie asks is why would a highbrow show invite a “stupid” female on it? Julie here is displaying some anxiety in her tone of voice. If these images of women are representational for the focus group, then Danielle Lloyd's position of jeopardy in appearing stupid on a highbrow show may also be Julie's jeopardy. The implication is that the producers of the show “knew” she was “stupid” but invited Danielle Lloyd anyway. Thus, whilst Julie is disparaging toward Danielle Lloyd, she is also disparaging toward the show's producers.

This focus group observes that Danielle Lloyd and other women are not in their right place, by which I mean that they are not behaving like self-surveilling and self-regulating post-feminists. Lloyd is not exercising “good” judgement by appearing on a show where she is set up as “stupid” and is scrutinised and surveyed negatively by audiences and producers alike. Whilst the group is unable to articulate the schism its members experience through the contradictions they encounter, they are clearly anxious about the ambiguity of the regulations of the world in which they live.

*These comments were made about Tess Daley, co presenter of Strictly Come Dancing (BBC)*

**Rachel** I don't like her, either...

**Julie** She really...

**Rachel** She was sitting, like, higher up than them so it was like she was trying to dominate the group...

**AWY** This is Tess Daley?

**Sophie** That's not really her fault, though, isn't that the set?

**Colette** She looks patronising.

**All** Yeah.

**Julie** She seemed to me like she was putting it on – **so** not natural. (Sarcasm).

**Sophie** She's, like, "Oh poor you," but she actually doesn't care!

**Lornette** She puts words in people's mouths. She says, "You're shaking, you're shaking – are you shaking?"

**Colette** She's really false

**Danni** Now that you've pointed all this out, I don't like her any more.

This conversation disparages the presenter on the grounds of "fakeness" and her lack of investment in and care about people. Rachel accuses the presenter of 'trying to dominate the group', which suggests that Tess Daley is removing herself from the ordinary. Sophie's comment that it's 'not her fault, though, isn't that the set?' is ignored by the group, as the general consensus is negative. In fact, Danni changes her mind about this presenter when presented with the "evidence" from the group: 'She actually doesn't care' is emphasised by Sophie, which feeds the group's dislike of the presenter. Caring is a trait usually associated with femininity, and although Tess Daley is vocalising a "caring" act – 'Oh poor you' – she is not believed, and again insincerity or "fakeness" is addressed by the group, bringing about a communal disparagement of the presenter.

*Continuing to watch Tess Daley on Strictly Come Dancing.*

**Julie** Claudia Winkleman is blatantly absolutely peed off that she has to be on the sister show, because it's a competition between her and Tess Daley who they like better...

**Danni** At one point she had the worst haircut ever...

**Colette** Who?

**Danni** Claudia Winkleman – it was, like, down there and then up here...

**Sophie** She tries to be funny, like; she just really tries...

**Colette** She tries too hard... I think she's prettier.

**Julie** I don't, I don't think any of them are pretty.

**Colette** I think she's pretty.

**Danni** The first show is more primetime, so it gets more viewers, so it's better...

**Colette** We're talking about what they look like...

**Danni** Yeah, I know, but still...

This conversation makes reference to 'pretty', 'tries to be funny' and 'tries too hard', all of which are ways that this presenter can be disparaged. Primetime television is recognised by the entire group as important in terms of media success and an indicator of a successful career. Usually, primetime attracts a family viewing audience, making it more impressive in terms of career success for the female presenters. On the whole, the expectation by the group is that primetime television is male-dominated, as men predominate as programme hosts and contributors to the shows.<sup>45</sup> In this case it is the Saturday evening show *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC1 audience viewing figures on average 9.6 million) where the female presenter Tess Daley co-hosts the show with veteran male celebrity Bruce Forsyth.

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<sup>45</sup> Roche, J., (n.d.) 'There's no doubting comedy is a male-dominated area. Men vastly outnumber women on the comedy circuit and predominate amongst the writers, cast, panel games, presenters and producers of TV comedy, in radio comedy only less so'. [http://www.sitcom.co.uk/writers/male\\_female.shtml](http://www.sitcom.co.uk/writers/male_female.shtml) (accessed January 2012).

The narrative of competition is present here in the focus group conversation. There is an assumption that the two female presenters are in competition with each other for the primetime spot, and Claudia Winkleman is in the least watched spot, ‘the sister show’. Whilst this may be true, as it is a natural aspect of their jobs as television presenters, it still constitutes disparagement of Winkleman by the group, because it is not “sisterly” to be so openly competitive. Colette’s assessment is that Claudia Winkleman is exhibiting competitive traits ‘for who they like better’ – presumably ‘they’ in this case refers to the show’s producers. Although the group do not use the term “sisterly,” there is, I suggest, some form of anxiety here that the two women should have to compete with each other. The ideas of being pretty and primetime appear to be co-dependent, and the prettiest presenter is “naturally” given the primetime spot, which is widely accepted as the most important attribute for a female presenter. At the same time, success is measured negatively when it is achieved at the expense of another female, and it appears to have stereotypical notions of beauty at its nexus. I discussed this “sisterly” notion earlier, and I think this is more evidence that although the group is very disparaging, they are also anxious about the idea of competition between the two female presenters. This can be evidenced later when the group members discuss Holly Willoughby and Fearne Cotton. The conflict between women competing with each other creates anger and unease for the group. By contrast, displays of friendship between presenters create displays of nostalgia, contentedness and humour.

**Rachel** I went to Big Fat Quiz of the Year to see it being filmed, and she [Claudia Winkleman] was on it and she was the most annoying, like, attention-seeking person ever! She was with Michael McIntyre and she was, like, I just love your hair... (Sarcastic voice).

Male presenters and comedians occupy this primetime space comfortably. For instance, *The Big Fat Quiz of the Year* (C4, Hot Sauce 2004- ), as mentioned by Rachel, is primarily male-dominated – the

writing team is male, as are the presenters<sup>46</sup> – and for females to take a position here involves some aspects of jeopardy for them and perhaps in turn for the focus group. Taking Salecl's (2010) point about interpassivity and proxy, this presenter is felt to be in a position of jeopardy compared to her male celebrity colleagues by attempting to be "funny," as this is a role usually associated with males (it involves competitiveness, confidence, outspokenness – all qualities assumed to be male-gendered), and so perhaps the disparagement exhibited here by the group is actually indicative of a fear of failure in a male-dominated environment for the presenter and, by proxy, for the focus group. Certainly, the anxiety displayed when discussing this presenter is palpable.

To use Davina McCall as an example, the group is less anxious about her behaviour on screen. McCall presented *Big Brother* from its first appearance on UK television in 2000 until 2010, making her highly recognisable as the sole host of a commercially successful show. The group's respect for McCall appears to be secure because she was the sole presenter of the show and had been in that position since its inception in 2000. This eliminates any notions of competition and reduces the possibility of being in jeopardy in relation to male presenters, as McCall was clearly identifiable as the face of *Big Brother* and had been defined in print, online and television as the lead presenter of a prestigious show. The group on the whole accepts and approves of Davina McCall without significant disparagement, which may be due to the lack of threat involved in McCall's on-screen identity; for example, she does not have a male co-host. Furthermore, as a familiar figure, she has been a constant presence in the girls' lives from an early age, as she has been appearing on television shows since 1992 (*Most Wanted*, MTV Europe 1992-1995). This gives McCall a sense of permanence and durability, and she has not failed as a television presenter; consequently, she is competent and the group therefore does not have to be anxious about how she is regarded by audiences and institutions. Another reassuring aspect of McCall is her motherhood. She continued

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<sup>46</sup> The production company website revealed that all four writers of the show are male and six of the seven members of the production team are male. The host of the show is also male.  
[http://www.comedy.co.uk/guide/tv/big\\_fat\\_quiz\\_of\\_the\\_year/details/](http://www.comedy.co.uk/guide/tv/big_fat_quiz_of_the_year/details/) (accessed February 2012).



her role as *Big Brother* presenter through her pregnancies (she has three children), which indicates that she is confident and comfortable with her maternalism. These are all factors that put McCall out of the reach of jeopardous situations. A similar sense of calmness in their conversations emanates from the group when they discuss Sharon Osborne, another presenter who is confident, enduring and is defined as much through her motherhood as she is through her fame as a media figure. To frame this within existing ideas about ideologies and gender, Ang's (1996, p.163) notion of identifying 'culturally more legitimate femininities' is useful here, as the group is calmer and reassured by the legitimacy of motherhood and parenting.

#### *On Cat Deeley*

Group all shouting about Cat Deeley

**Danni** I liked her *Stars in Their Eyes* – that's it.

**Rachel** I just remember her from my childhood and I see her as someone I used to watch every Saturday morning, that's when I quite liked her.

Group shouting

**Julie** Then she was real and now she's not! (Angry).

**Sophie** Now she's all fake and "I've got money"! (Angry).

**Julie** She does other things – that's when she started getting a bit...

**Danni** She's big headed. She's **huge** in America, everyone loves her in America.

In LA she's huge, apparently.

**Rachel** Good, they can **have her**! (Dismissive).

**Sophie** I don't even know where she is now.

*The group sees a slide of Cat Deeley on screen in a later session*

**GROUP** Ugh – aargh – ugh...

**Julie** ... actually just want to claw her eyes out! (Angry).

This is an interesting response to Cat Deeley, who in my initial discussion had been identified as a popular presenter. However, Deeley had subsequently moved to the US to host a reality television programme, *So You think You Can Dance* (Fox US, 2006-), where she received a nomination for “Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Host For a Reality or Reality Competition Programme.” Clearly this is a prestigious award and proof of America’s recognition of her hosting abilities. However, for the group, this move to the US clearly represents betrayal: ‘Now she’s all fake and “I’ve got money.”’ This creates a clear contradiction with other commentaries on success, where Katie Price is recommended for her business acumen and Davina McCall is excused any potentially negative behaviour through overall acceptance; however, Cat Deeley does not win the approval of the group. The basis for this disapproval appears to be her lack of ordinary behaviour through her international success and perhaps her betrayal of them through her absence from UK television screens. Rachel recalls watching Cat Deeley in her childhood, and the vehemence of the responses by the group when discussing Deeley in America does suggest anger at the thought of betrayal. This is a recurring theme in this ethnographic research. In terms of how this teenage audience responds to Deeley’s career success, if female presenters are representational and we consider Coleman’s (2008) notion of how media images ‘limit or extend becoming’ (2008, p.174), then I need to consider what this means for the teenage girls. Coleman refers to the way her focus group was able to look at media images in relation to their own images, and she uses their descriptions of domestic photographs to illustrate her point:

In this article I have attempted to demonstrate how the relations between the girls’ bodies and their own photographic images and “media images” limit and extend the possibilities of becomings. I suggested that, while it is relatively straightforward to conceive photographic images as producing the becoming of bodies through the knowledge, understandings, and

experiences they produce, to think of media images in the same way seems a more difficult endeavour. However, conceiving media images not as isolated images but as always in relations with other images, including domestic photographs, opens up a way of seeing how they are not in relations of effect but rather themselves limit or extend the becoming of the girls' bodies (Coleman, 2008, p.174).

For my focus group, their understanding of Cat Deeley's media image is as a childhood "friend;"

For example, one member comments, 'I used to watch her every Saturday morning'. This image may therefore be conceived in relation to their own image as a child watching Deeley on television, and now they perceive her as an absent image, as she is no longer part of their media landscape and discourse. Julie's comment, 'I just want to claw her eyes out', is a violent and disturbing image, and I believe it is testament to the intensity of their involvement at this time. Julie had not up until this point displayed any such violent emotion towards the presenters, and the comment was made in a very matter-of-fact tone, making it even more unsettling. I would like to consider at this juncture some ideas about envy and disparagement. Bainbridge (2013) suggests that the commonplace practice by women journalists to disparage other women in their columns is symptomatic of a greater malaise, which she suggests is the result of the gains made from a feminist past (second-wave feminism of the 1970s and '80s) not entering into our contemporary cultural practices, despite commonly held assumptions that they have done so. The result is that women have a disconnected relationship with their own femininity. Using the newsroom as an example, Bainbridge (2013, p.222) suggests that this is a place of a 'sexist and masculinist culture', and the way that women journalists cope within this environment is 'to compete with their male colleagues for the most masculinist position possible'. Therefore, the disparagement of other women in their news columns is a rehearsal of defending against an attack from male colleagues, whom they feel they are likely to be under in the newsroom. This is an interesting way in which to consider the anxiety exhibited by the girls. Their disparagement of the behaviour of the women on screen acts as a defence mechanism to protect themselves from acting out the same behaviour and presumably

receiving the same criticism. I have discussed earlier the way the girls appear to armour themselves against the failures of the female presenters, which is similar to Bainbridge's point. However, in a contradictory way, the girls also enjoy some failures. These failures, I propose, act as a release valve for the intense pressure involved in negotiating girlhood and then womanhood. For example, they are clear in their assessment of Davina McCall's recovery from drug and alcohol addiction and also her eating disorder. They suggest that "everyone makes mistakes," which serves to define McCall as normal, and they are again reassured by her behaviour. This does not, however, apply to all "failures" that they encounter, and I will try to unravel this notion later in this work, as it involves an assessment of social class as a central factor.

### **Affectionate disparagement**

*On watching Davina McCall*

**Colette**      I swear Davina McCall's changed her accent.

**Sophie**      I love Davina McCall.

**Colette**      She's trying to be posh.

**Rachel**      I hate her.

**Sophie**      You **hate her?! (Astonished).**

**Rachel**      She's so annoying.

**Sophie**      I love her so much. (Admiring/wistful).

**Danni**      I don't like Davina McCall – all she says is, "This is the Big Brother house, this is Davina." That's all...

**Colette**      "... you mustn't swear."

**Danni**      Yeah, that's all she says now.

**Sophie**      Yeah, but it might be her trademark.

*Watching a clip where Davina McCall discusses her decision to wear a bikini on Big Brother, followed by the clip of McCall where she takes off her coat on the Big Brother show to reveal her bikini to the audience.*

**Sophie**      Look at her roots in that picture...

**Lornette**    ... pregnant every time... (Laughing).

**Sophie**      ... what is she wearing? (Affectionate).

**Lornette**    I hate that face she does. (Familiar).

**Colette**     I don't remember that.

As they watch the clip of McCall revealing her bikini-clad body to the *Big Brother* studio audience, the group are particularly silent as they inspect her body and performance.

*There is then some laughter, followed by an entirely silent but communal inspection of McCall's image.*

**Lornette**    She's such a tart. (Said with amusement).

Laughter from the group, followed by more laughter.

The assessment of Davina McCall's behaviour by the group appears to be affectionate and accepting despite her actions, which could be seen as an attempt by McCall to sexualise her image. Whilst watching McCall remove her coat to reveal her body in a bikini to the television audience, the group is uncharacteristically silent. Their comments are sparse and they move on to the next clip without any real disparagement. The comment 'She's such a tart' is received with amusement and what appears to be genuine acceptance of McCall. It is the silence here that reveals the group's interest in McCall, as the opportunity to be disparaging is present but not taken up. However, the group members all silently inspect McCall's body, checking and assessing against their own and against expected media versions of female bodies. At this moment, the group is silently communal and the opportunities for a conversation about expectations for women's bodies are missed; instead, their thoughts are internalised. On reflection, this is the moment where, as a researcher, I

could have intervened and questioned them about their response to McCall's actions. However, at the time I was staying within my own set of guidelines for this ethnographic methodology by stepping back, remaining mostly silent and observing the discussion. If I were to repeat this kind of research method, I would reconsider this methodology, as it could be seen as an opportunity that a more experienced ethnographer may not have missed.

## **Empowerment**

### *A discussion about Katie Price*

**Danni** They said there will never be another Jordan, there will never be a glamour model as successful as her...

**Colette** No, there never will be...

**Julie** She's a complete one-off...

**Julie** ... because she's done stuff that glamour models never do, like you'll find famous glamour models but they won't have written a book, made an album, made a... about their husband... made a perfume... all that stuff that she does.

**Colette** Jordan... it's not that good pay either.

**Julie** No, it's not, it's shit pay – you don't know if you're going to get a job or not...

**Colette** Glamour models, sometimes they get a load of money for doing one shoot and then they don't know when they're going to get paid. She's minted because she's done other stuff.

**Sophie** And she's got so many life experiences as well, like Harvey being really ill... like in her book she has, like, loads of dodgy things, like, when she started as a glamour model...

**Danni** Yeah.

**Julie** Apparently, when she was, like, fifteen she wanted to start to get into modelling and her and her mum found someone and ehm...

**Sophie** Yeah, that's what I heard...

**Julie** ... and, like, he made her come on her own, made Jordan come on her own and he got there and he got her to do, like, wet T-shirt modelling and stuff and he... gave her a milkshake and she said "No." Thank God she didn't like them, because what he used to do was put, like, a drug in it and he'd done it to other girls and he would, like, do something to them and he would take photos of them and he would take their top off because they would be unconscious... and he would take pictures... and she said that she didn't like milkshakes and that's what saved her...

During all the conversations about Katie Price (Jordan) the group was positive and clearly in admiration of this media figure. Julie and Danni construct a compelling dramatic narrative around Price's struggle to achieve fame. They recount their knowledge of her life experiences involving the dangers (from male photographers) of glamour modelling, motherhood, her disabled son and the ability to become financially successful despite the hardships she has had to endure. This is in contrast to the group's condemnation of Kate Thornton, of whom they disapprove because she had tried to become more financially successful. There may be a social class issue here which warrants further investigation. Katie Price and Kate Thornton are from different social backgrounds, working class and middle class, respectively, which may influence the ways in which the focus group girls assess their lives. The group are from a mixed social background, and as I discussed in Chapter 1, some are from single-parent families, which makes social class more difficult to define. Their previous conversations tended to suggest that they were more familiar with Kate Thornton's background, and as I noted in many conversations they made references to problems with "chavs" in their neighbourhoods. This derisory term was used as a way of referring to working-class families, while they also used the term "pikey" to refer to "troublesome" traveller communities. The group were clearly able to define the "other," and their friendships were based on similarities in their social backgrounds. Katie Price was approved of by the group because of her financial acumen and her ability to remove herself for her background, although the group did recognise some of her

behaviour as 'chavvy'. I would like to attempt to address this point in further research, as it may be a fruitful area for investigation. I have already mentioned the group's positive response to Davina McCall's dramatic narrative and that her middle-class status (and French mother) may be a factor. Overall, the group were clear that they saw Katie Price as an empowered woman, who is able to rise above adversity and is in control of her own career. Price is the only female the group talked about in terms of empowerment with such confidence and clarity, and whilst some group members may be critical of some of her actions, they are all in agreement as to her power.

The statement that Katie Price is 'a complete one-off', by Julie, is supported by the group's nods and murmurs of agreement. Unlike their affection for Davina McCall, the tone of this conversation is respectful; the group admires Price's ability to be a model, an author, a mother, to create her own perfume, be married to Peter Andre and by implication also help his career. Price appears to the group to have been instrumental in creating her own success, thereby empowering her own future seemingly singlehandedly. Julie comments that glamour models are not paid much, yet despite this Katie Price has managed to be financially independent and successful. There is an element of melodrama in the recounted story of the untrustworthy photographer. Price's pluck and wit in managing to escape his clutches are much admired by the group, therefore adding dramatic tension to her life story and introducing jeopardy as a dramatic device. This idea of jeopardy is also considered when the group discusses her son, whose life threatening disability is highlighted in the media alongside interviews with Price discussing her love for him. Jeopardy is a recurring theme in this work and contributes to the notions that these female presenters and media figures are representational for the group – the potential threats to their lives, both professional and personal, are taken up by the group and discussed with dramatic trepidation.



**Sophie** There was this thing on *Loose Women* and it was about how we should look up to Katie Price as a role model for young girls. I don't necessarily think that the glam side of her, I don't think you... but the other side, the business side, you definitely should because I know her glamour modelling has given her a head start but she's been very, very clever in what she's done and she's always there to promote something and she will work hard. And you can see that through the TV show, if she puts anything on hold to make sure she can do well and it's publicised enough for her to make money. So I think on that kind of side you should look up to her but not the glamour modelling side, because you're just presenting yourself as an image to men rather than an actual person...

Here, the assumption is that 'presenting an image to men' is a by-product and necessary aspect of fame for women. More interestingly, Sophie refers to Price's glamour modelling as 'just presenting yourself', appearing to include herself and presumably women in general in this comment. This very much supports the idea that these women are representational for teenage girls, in which case it could go some way to explaining the emotional intensity that these focus group conversations sometimes reach. It could also provide an understanding of the focused approach teenage girls can have toward women in the media spotlight, by which I am referring to the dramatic narratives I observed being constructed around individual presenters, namely the accusations of betrayal when a presenter is no longer "like the girl next door," as well as the sense of danger perceived by the group when members observe these women competing in a male-dominated environment. The comments 'She tries to be funny, like, she just really tries... she tries too hard' and 'She was on it and she was the most annoying, like, attention-seeking person ever!' suggest that seeking attention is a trait that should be very heavily criticised, as becoming visible in this environment is to be disparaged. Clearly, the presenter in question is attempting to fulfil her employment commitment "to entertain;" however, this is found to be unacceptable behaviour by the group. As we saw earlier,

the presenter, Claudia Winkleman, potentially loses her respectability because of her non-feminine behaviour, and she puts both herself and the group in jeopardy when appearing on a quiz show with male comedians.

Sophie's admiration of Price comes from the model's ability to "work hard." This kind of comment became familiar to me throughout many conversations with a number of teenage girls, who reiterated a common assumption that Price is "clever" and "works hard." The perception is that the hard-working and clever characteristics of Price's persona present the real Katie Price, the actual person and the glamour modelling, whereas the sexualised version of Katie Price (Jordan) is the sacrifice she makes to maintain her financial success. Clearly here, the group is actively seeking positive representations from Katie Price's media status, and these characteristics are approved of by the group.

*Watching Trisha Goddard as a guest on a television chat show*  
(Al Murray's Happy Hour 2008 *Avalon TV*)

**Julie and Rachel** No! (Both exclaim as she walks on to the set).

**Sophie** She looks quite false... [her] voice is quite deep.

**Danni** I feel quite sorry for her, because her husband left her for a man.

**Colette** **Really?!** (Surprised).

**Sophie** Years ago or recently?

**Danni** Recently.

**Rachel** Oh that's **horrible!** (Sympathetic).

**Lornette** I saw her once and she sounds exactly the same as on TV...

**Rachel** ...she's well formal, though at least when Holly's trying to look feminine she's just, like, in a business suit with her hair up...

**Colette** ... I feel so bad for her, like, she had, like, depression and stuff. I know that everyone gets it – not everyone but loads of people – that's why I don't really like celebrities 'cos they, like, it's world war three and people do it every day and stuff; that's why I don't really like them. But I still feel bad for her, because she's putting on a brave face and she's trying to help other people. I know it's just a talk show, but at least she's trying to do something to help other people.

**Julie** I love Jeremy Kyle, but she's better than him...

**Danni** ... all he does is shout at everyone.

**Julie** ... she actually helps, she makes friends where he just shouts... She actually does know what they're talking about and she...

**Danni** ... she has a degree in therapy or something like that ...

**Colette** She's saying she got her own experiences as well, so she's giving another point of view.  
  
She can actually help them...

**Rachel** ... she doesn't look very feminine really, does she?

**Julie** ... yeah, but I just think... if I wanted to become a presenter then I'd be like her, I just think she helps people... She's sweet.

**Colette** She's nice, she's actually doing something... She's pretty though; look, her hair's nice.

**Danni** It's a wig.

**Julie** Is it?

**Danni** Yeah, she's got afro hair.

**Colette** She is actually talking to him though [Al Murray], having a conversation... she's interesting.

This discussion about Trisha Goddard was quite animated, as the group were really commenting on her presenting skills, which had not been typical of the conversations we had had about other presenters. In addition, Lornette appeared surprised to have met this presenter and found her to be ‘exactly the same as on TV’. The expectation here is that media images would not necessarily reflect a “real” person. So, in this instance, Trisha Goddard is being commended for her authenticity. Again, a dramatic narrative is constructed around betrayal. It appears important to establish whether Goddard’s husband left her ‘years ago or recently’? Presumably this would add to the melodrama of the narrative, and because her husband ‘left her for a man’, the drama is compounded and sympathy is intensified: “That’s horrible.” This presenter is now set up as a vulnerable person by the group, and any further discussions employ this trait as the cornerstone. Comments such as ‘she’s nice... she’s sweet... she’s pretty... she’s interesting... she actually does know what she’s talking about’ are all complimentary and supportive. Colette’s observation that celebrities ‘act like its world war three’ when they are diagnosed with illness is interesting, as it is Goddard’s ability to be “normal” that is commended here. As she is ‘putting on brave face and is trying to help other people’, the presenter is admired for her stoicism. The tone of this discussion is much more relaxed and calmer than the intensely emotive involvement in Katie Price. A factor here could be age, as Trisha Goddard is in her 50s and therefore may have a different representational function for the group. Their observations tend to be more neutral, which may be because of the distance in years between them and Goddard.

*A discussion about Sharon Osborne leaving X Factor*

**Danni** She’s a talented businesswoman.

**AWY** Why do you say that?

**Danni** Because she manages her husband and his kids... even though now they're world-class bums and into drugs... she produced *The Osbornes* and she did the books and she had her own TV show. So it's a clever way she marketed herself.

**Sophie** She's funny to watch as well.

Sharon Osborne is also approved of and admired by the group because of her ability to “cope” with her domestic problems and to be successfully multifunctional: mother, wife, author and television host whilst also being clever and funny. These functions and traits are similar to the ones attributed to Katie Price, and it is their talent at self-promotion that is appreciated here. Noticeably the group does not disparage Sharon Osborne for her humour as they did Claudia Winkleman, which again may be connected to age and success. Sharon Osborne has proved herself to be tough, independent and courageous through her on- and off-screen life stories. She has dealt with her own illness, her children's drug problems and more famously has confronted Simon Cowell in a public power struggle during her time on *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004).

For the group, she may represent safety, as she appears to be healthily inured to criticism and ridicule. The kinds of jeopardy discussed earlier which other presenters may create for themselves (and therefore the group) through their high visibility in mainstream television entertainment are absent here. Claudia Winkleman, on the other hand, is younger and less successful and is still open to criticism (and, unlike Osborne, may not be able to defend herself). Therefore, the group is less likely to feel comfortable about her performances on screen. These observations suggest that the group finds self-improvement, for example being in charge of your own media show (Sharon Osborne), being in control of one's self-image (Katie Price) or struggling against negative odds (Trisha Goddard) empowering and evidence of success.

## Liberation/Knowingness

*A discussion about fame*

**Lornette** It really does matter if you have a really good publicist, and there are only a few who are really good. Like Kerry Katona – even though she’s shit, she’s really good because, like, she has loads of money because of what she does...

**Julie** ... yeah, but it’s like, you know, Nicki from *Big Brother*, the most annoying person on earth and you think who the hell would have her anywhere? But she’s actually got her own column in a magazine...

**Colette** (Amazed) Has she?!

**Julie** Kerry Katona has got, like, an article in *Hello* magazine, like, what the Queen reads in that magazine she has an... it just shows you...

**Danni** ... so has Coleen.

**Sophie** Why though? Why have they got it? (Genuine puzzlement).

**Danni** ... it’s because they get to do more things than a normal person does.

**Julie** What also aggravates me is when they try to be stupid but they’re not stupid. But they act stupid to get a laugh out of it, but we’re not laughing with you, we’re laughing at you. They did the *Thursday Night Project* and they got all the *Big Brother* contestants on it and they were talking about Osama Bin Laden and she said, “Who’s Osama?” Even, like, five-year-olds have heard of Osama, even if you don’t necessarily know what he’s done. She was a twenty-six-year-old woman! (Anger and dismay).

**Colette** ... it’s all about making money though, isn’t it? They’re all thinking “how do I make money?”

**Julie** They all try and play off each other’s game plans.

**Colette** We’re reading so much into it though, it’s like “it’s a game, it’s this, it’s that.” No, she’s just an idiot.

**Lornette** ... ‘cos I think everyone wants to make money – everyone in the whole goddamn world. But there are different reasons why they do it.

These comments appear to refer to ideas of liberation inasmuch as the group assesses what devices women use to gain financial success and media acknowledgement. What appears clear is that the group does not invest in the idea of liberation for these minor media figures; their “game playing” to maintain their media status is exposed by the group. By presenting themselves as “stupid” they are appearing foolish, which is unacceptable for the group. My understanding here is that these presenters and media figures ‘get to do more things than a normal person does’, so effectively they enjoy a kind of liberation from normalcy. However, the route these celebrities use is disparaged because it is not respectable or honest, inasmuch as it presents a harmful representation of women and the group sees through this behaviour.

## **Individualism**

### *A discussion about Katie Price*

**Danni**      They said there will never be another Jordan, there will never be a glamour model as successful as her...

**Colette**    ... there never will be...

**Julie**      ... she’s a complete one-off...

**Julie**      ... because she’s done stuff that glamour models never do, like you’ll find famous glamour models but they won’t have written a book, made an album, made a... about their husband... made a perfume... all that stuff that she does...

**Lornette**    ... she seems more down to earth and she likes other people and can laugh at herself.

**Rachel**      ... plus she’s been through so much that you have to respect her in that sense.

**Lornette**    ... she seems more real... not trying to force it.

**Sophie**      I think she works extremely hard.

**Danni**      Ambition.

**AWY**      Ambition?

**Danni**      Ambition, she's honest as well.

**Julie**      Yeah, exactly... she doesn't pretend to be anyone else.

**Sophie**      She's very down to earth... I think all the other girls, they conform to be a glamour model, they are taken to one side and... by their managers.

The suggestion here is that Katie Price is not like the other glamour models and has made herself different, showing her individuality and honesty through her choices and successes. When I searched the transcripts for indications of individualism, I found it very difficult to attribute any discussion the group had engaged in which identified television presenters as individuals or as remarkably different than anyone else. This is possibly a consequence of the role these women play in the lives of teenage girls. Unlike music or film stars, it is the ordinariness of the women that initially attracts the girls, and it is the measure of normality that is checked and assessed for acceptability. Katie Price is applauded for possessing normality and individuality in almost equal measure, and she has not succumbed to being 'taken aside' by her manager or 'pretend to be anyone else'; in fact, 'she seems more real... not trying to force it'. All of these comments commend Price and therefore highlight the issues the group has with other presenters who are condemned as false or insincere. We need to consider here the notion of individualism, as I have identified this as one of the themes to consider during the analysis of the transcripts. Walters (2010) and Banyard (2010), as discussed in an earlier chapter, suggest that the notions of empowerment and individualism present in many narratives for young women drive their actions to achieve self-perfection. Whilst I agree that the narratives are certainly present in the way media texts address young women, this group does not focus on individualism as a positive trait, and their comments tend to indicate a preference for communality:



**Sophie** I like Fearne Cotton.

**Julie** She would be, like, what my friend would be like. What I am trying to say here, I would like her as my friend.

All Laugh

**Julie** Well I would. (Embarrassed and also laughing).

Whilst Julie is aware of the absurdity of her comment and is gently ridiculed by the group, she is also quite serious about the friendship. The presenter appears to Julie to be normal and similar to her in terms of lifestyle and personality.

## Sexualisation

*Watching Holly Willoughby on the same chat show as Trisha Goddard being interviewed by Al Murray*

(Al Murray's Happy Hour 2008 *Avalon TV*)

**Colette** She's changed. (Accusing).

**Julie** She used to be like the girl next door, but then as soon as she started attracting some male attention... she's just changed. (Disappointment).

**AWY** What's not real about her? What should she have done?

**Danni** In interviews she says "I don't think I'm pretty;" well, you obviously do – look at the way she's sat. She **absolutely loves herself!** (Frustration).

**Danni** I don't understand why she always smiles – even when she's talking she smiles. (Dismissive).

**Lornette** She sounds so happy about everything and so shocked. (Dismissive).

**Rachel** She used to be well all right, I quite liked her – she used to do the children's shows and I used to watch her. (Disappointment).

**Colette** Is that on SMTV live?

**Rachel** Yeah – she was well all right then, but now it's, like, oh she's showing off her boobs... (Scornful).

ALL LAUGH (Scornful).

**Sophie** Yes, I swear it's, like, every week she's wearing **another** revealing dress. (Scornful).

**Danni** That's the only thing she doesn't act surprised about that she gets her boobs out.  
(Dismissive).

**Lornette** Yes, she used to be good friends with Fearne Cotton.

**Sophie** Yeah, her and Fearne's show that they did ages ago...

**Rachel** I liked that. (Disappointment).

This conversation elicited a number of emotions. The tone of the discussion ranged from accusatory, disappointed and frustrated through to dismissive and finally scornful. Holly Willoughby is a presenter whom they have watched from their early teenage years, and their memories of her are bound up with some childhood nostalgia. Some of Willoughby's career has been spent co-presenting with another female from the group's childhood, Fearne Cotton. Picking up on a point from earlier about competition amongst female presenters, the memory for the group is that these two presenters are friends and they therefore appeal to their sense of "sisterhood," as discussed earlier. This sense of betrayal is therefore felt profoundly. The group has mixed emotions about Fearne Cotton; however, they do not dismiss her on the grounds of the over-sexualisation of her image as they do Willoughby, who became renowned for her revealing dresses on her show *Dancing On Ice* (ITV). The dresses then became encoded within her persona:

Defiant Holly Willoughby insists: "I love my curves – and I'll keep showing them off. From her infamous plunging cream frock to her latest daring low-slung backless gown, Holly Willoughby's wardrobe has continued to raise eyebrows in recent months. But the *Dancing On Ice* presenter has revealed she has no intention of covering up her car-crash curves any time soon. In a new interview, the 27-year-old says: "I'm not going to change my entire wardrobe just because of what people have said. I love the dresses I wear, I think they are beautiful and until I think differently, I'll carry on."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Defiant Holly insists 'I love my curves and I'll keep showing them off'. *London Evening Standard* (online) available at <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/showbiz/article-23441735-defiant-holly-willoughby-insists-i-love-my-curves---and-ill-keep-showing-them-off.do> (accessed March 2009).



Fig. 6 Holly Willoughby

This interview with Willoughby expresses her determination to be in control of her own image, which in some ways could be interpreted as empowering. However, this group has no such understanding of her decision to wear low-cut dresses. Julie's accusation that she 'absolutely loves herself' and Sophie's emphasis '**another** revealing dress' exemplify that none of the group sees Willoughby's choices as empowering; rather, they are mindful of how this appears to male audiences: 'She used to be like the girl next door... then, as soon as she started to get some male attention... she's just changed'. Whilst they understood Katie Price's decision to be a glamour model, as they see this as a necessary aspect of her business career 'because you're just presenting yourself as an image to men rather than an actual person...' (Sophie), Willoughby's appearance appears to be designed purely to attract male attention, and therefore it cannot be excused. This might suggest that a sexualised image is acceptable if it is embedded within a long-term career plan that does not eventually involve trading on your sexualised image. The suggestion by Sophie here is that Price's image is just that – an image which is not real and is only for a male audience who are duped into believing this image. Willoughby presents only one image and appears to be trading on this. The accusation that Willoughby 'absolutely loves herself' is about not providing another, more

acceptable side of her persona that is exclusive to women and can therefore explain or account for her desire to appeal to males. By contrast, Katie Price is very self-aware of the effect of her sexualised image, and this honesty is appreciated and understood by the group.

## Equality

**Julie** Has anyone seen Trisha Goddard's funky new hair? In the paper she has a new hair style.

**Rachel** I don't like her, she's just a money-grabbing... she left ITV because Channel 5 paid her more for it.

**Sophie** Is that why she left?

**Colette** Yeah, but I'd do that.

**Sophie** Yeah, but...

**Colette** If someone said, "I'll give you a couple of million pounds more," you'd say yes.

**AWY** Do you think she gets a million pounds?

**All** No!

**Danni** Not a couple, but if she gets more money... But, like, Natasha Kaplinksy moved from BBC to Channel 5 because she got a million pound contract to go to Channel 5.

It appears, then, that being offered a lucrative contract is acceptable and understood. However, their ire is reserved for Kate Thornton, who supposedly asked for a pay increase when she was hosting *The X Factor*. When women in television are given approval by the institution they are employed by, then the actions of women presenters are accepted. However, if a women presenter feels she may deserve a pay increase, the group is disturbed by the notion of equality and agency.

**Danni** ... like, Fearne Cotton got to interview the princes; I understand that she's young, but America has got Jay Leno.

**Julie** I'll tell you what, Phillip Schofield and Fearne Cotton are presenting Nelson Mandela's ninetieth birthday. I'm sorry, but wouldn't you want someone a little bit more prestigious with actual knowledge rather than Fearne Cotton?!

**Lornette** ... Fearne Cotton! Fearne Cotton?! Oh My God! (Incredulous).

**Danni** ... she could be a bit more politically aware.

**Julie** I quite like Fearne Cotton, but I don't think she should be presenting the Nelson Mandela concert...

**Sophie** Did he pick her?

**Danni** No, the BBC did.

**Colette** ITV did.

**Sophie** ... someone, like, I'm not being rude, but someone like Trevor McDonald. Doesn't he have one of those special awards from the Queen? He's more his age.

**Colette** ... because he's black?

**Sophie** No, or someone like...

**Julie** ... someone who's renowned for, like, news or...

Again, this reinforces the idea that women presenters have a specific and limited role on television, particularly younger presenters. Phillip Schofield is not discussed as being out of place in this situation (Nelson Mandela's birthday), but Fearne Cotton is, as she should 'be more prestigious with actual knowledge'. "Knowledge" here refers to and is equated with traditional ideas of intelligence, and the assumption is that Fearne Cotton is not educated in this way and would not be "up to the job," whilst it is assumed Phillip Schofield is more suitable and better educated. I carried out a cursory check on the educational achievements of both presenters and found that both have

achieved the same academic level and neither has attended university<sup>48</sup>. However, the assumption is that because Schofield is male he must be more competent and suitable for this presenting role. Jay Leno, the male American chat show host, is also used to illustrate Fearne Cotton's shortcomings. By "prestigious" Julie is referring to the kinds of television presenter who hold prestige for audiences because of the television shows on which they appear. Despite the fact both Phillip Schofield and Jay Leno are light entertainment presenters, the group were prepared to give them more gravitas than their female colleagues.

### *On Alexa Chung*

**Julie** ... and she interviewed Tony Blair – how the hell did a woman [who] presented a television channel go to interview the prime minister, how does that work? You would expect it from like someone at the BBC who [does] particularly well in news, for example. But it's not – it's some woman who presents. (Incredulous).

This conversation is very clear in its intention: '... some woman who present' is clearly derogatory and Julie is astonished that Chung was able to interview the then Prime Minister. Contemporary and popular ideas (discussed earlier in this work) suggest that women are now empowered and have achieved equality with men, therefore rendering feminism and feminist principles as unnecessary and redundant. These comments by the group suggest a far more entrenched understanding of male and female roles and opportunities. Despite the group being born in the 1990s and experiencing media images of "empowered and liberated women" for over 16 years, they still retain very limiting notions of a woman's place in the world. In many ways these ideas are far less encouraging than my own understanding of female empowerment in the

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<sup>48</sup> Phillip Schofield was finally offered a job in September 1979 at Broadcasting House, London, working for Radio Outside Broadcasts as a bookings clerk. At 17, he was the youngest person in the building.  
<http://www.officialphillipschofield.com/biography>

1970s. However, I feel I have observed a collective knowingness from the group that informs their scepticism and hostility towards dishonesty displayed by institutions such as the advertising industry (advertisements for hair dye and chocolate) and their suspicion of television channels that deliberately invite guests on their show for dishonest reasons (Danielle Lloyd, *The Culture Show* BBC 2). This suggests that there exists a collective disbelief and mistrust that could perhaps be harnessed into a deeper consideration of inequalities, if there were more opportunities for young women to explore this terrain. I will consider this observation in more detail in the next chapter, where I will be investigating feminism and neoliberalism, as I think this may be the space for a proper consideration of terms such as “collectivism” and “sisterly” in regard to young women.

## Knowingness

*A general discussion on Katie Price and media fame*

**Lornette** I think she was quite mature beforehand, but I think everyone noticed how mature she was when she had her baby and it was definitely...

**Danni** Yeah.

**Lornette** I think it proved to people that she was capable of doing something other than the image.

**Colette** ‘Cos if like you look at people in magazines you think, well she’s stupid or look at her, she’s tiny, she’s dieting... and she’s this and she’s that...

**AWY** So what you’re saying is the more you know someone, the more you get the opportunity to...

**Julie** Yeah, you get... of first impressions... ... and I think even now when magazines do interviews with them, they still twist it to make it sound good for their magazine, and so you just get a general impression of someone.

- Sophie** You do believe what you read; I know you shouldn't, but you do because you're quite consumed by it, so if that's all the impression that you're getting, then it does create a first...
- Danni** It's because they get to do more things than a normal person does.
- Sophie** Yeah, but all they have... I read the Alex one and it's "here's me in my latest dress that I..." They're crap: "This is what you should be wearing this is what I bought... me and my husband went to this place on holiday, we spent this much money..."
- Colette** Some people get so obsessed with their lives... exactly, people still buy those magazines and at the end of the day you've still read it and people get so obsessed with their lives and some people... and we're sitting here talking about it... so that's what they want – people talking about them... It's like getting some "randomer" off the street and getting them to write it...
- Sophie** ... it's like they're trying to be so clever, and they're not...
- Colette** But that's the reason why you watch these programmes, 'cos at the end of the day you are interested in their lives, whether it's boring or not...
- Julie** Denise Van Outen's one...
- Colette** ... it's because we're nosey; it could be anyone...
- Sophie** ... it's like when you're going down the motorway and there's been a crash...
- Lornette** ... even though I hate Chantelle, I have to watch the show just to watch, just to see what she does...
- Colette** ... do you know what I watch? "Chantelle wants to be a pop star," or whatever it's called...
- Danni** ... and she just wants to be Victoria Beckham... I was watching her doing dance steps and she couldn't even do it...

For the group, there is an acknowledgement of the intentions of the producers of the texts and the celebrities involved in the creation of their image. The group has effectively distinguished "normal" and "not normal" as indicators of "approved" and "unapproved" women. Katie Price's pregnancy



for the group is an indicator of her normalcy, and they note ‘she was capable of doing something other than her image’. The lack of belief in the idea of celebrity is clear, whilst the group are willing to invest in a cursory involvement with the women: ‘It’s because we’re nosey and it could be anyone,’ thus making it clear that they recognise the mechanics of fame and how they are supposed to respond to these images of women. They also appear to take some pleasure in not responding to attempts to “sell” them images of celebrity. Sophie’s comment, ‘I read the Alex one and it’s, “Here’s me in my latest dress that I...”’ They’re crap: “Here’s what you should be wearing...” Colette also comments: ‘Look at her, she’s stupid, or she’s tiny, she’s dieting.’ This evokes the way cultural studies academics in the past have offered an ideological explanation – “cultural dupes” to explain the way women respond to media texts (often excluding themselves in this response to media images). These girls are suggesting that some people become obsessed with celebrity but that they do not, suggesting that they feel themselves to have a kind of superior knowingness about the performance of media figures.

*A further discussion about media images and audiences*

**Sophie** You do believe what you read. I know you shouldn’t, but you do because you’re quite consumed by it, so if that’s all the impression that you’re getting, then it does create a first...

**Danni** It’s all about being nosey...

**Colette** Yeah.

**Danni** You see pictures of, like, Victoria Beckham and she always has that pout and she always looks really unhappy and that’s what the press want to see. And then in interviews she seems, like, really okay.

**Julie** Yeah, and loads of people have said that she’s actually got a really good sense of humour.

**Colette** It’s when you watch them on talk shows that you can form a proper opinion... your never gonna know someone, are you? They are just in the public eye; they’re not your friends or anything like that, so you don’t know them.

**AWY** Do you think, if you think, if you met Katie/Jordan, say, she came to the Media Showcase, she would talk to you?

**All** Yeah.

**Julie** Yeah, she would probably be a bit, not false but she wouldn't tell us her life story...

The group appears to have a consensus on the real and not real personas of the women in the media. All of the group members are able to factor in to their assessments the intentions of the producers of the texts; here, the magazine wants the audience to see Victoria Beckham pouting and unhappy, which is evident to Danni. However, Sophie admits 'you're quite consumed by it' on first impression. However, they also understand that watching them in an interview will give the audience a clearer view of the real persona, but ultimately they 'don't know them'; they are 'not your friends'. This conversation suggests a sensibility within the group. Whilst they are intrigued by the magazine stories, they are also mindful of the intentions of the producers of the text and realise how personas are constructed by both the women and the text producers, and whilst they are willing to engage with these real and not real personas, they know they are not real or unknowable.

#### *On Katie Price*

**Colette** ... on one of the episodes she met a woman whose son had exactly the same condition as Harvey and she said it was so nice to speak to her and everything... she spoke to her as if she was anyone...

**Danni** Yeah, 'cos they're going through the same thing, aren't they?

**Lornette** I think that's what... she doesn't think of herself as an image... because her family is going through the same thing...

In this instance Katie Price is commended for her lack of image: 'She doesn't think of herself as an image I think this means that of all the women we discussed in the focus group sessions, Katie Price is most likely to be untouched by the demands of fame and celebrity, and therefore she is more acceptable and more "like a friend," albeit with the acknowledgement that she is not their

friend. Katie Price often orchestrates her media performances, which her reality television show examines in some detail.<sup>49</sup> This acknowledgement by Katie Price is appreciated by the group for its honesty, and the question of which aspects of her persona are real and not real becomes less important, as Price appears to be able to convince the group that she is real and sincere.

*More on Katie Price*

**Julie** Yeah, the nanny...

**Sophie** There's, like, a nanny in the family and apparently she's been telling the newspapers rumours and stuff about Katie and Peter having big fall outs and he's threatening to leave her and...

**Danni** ... he wouldn't threaten her.

**Julie** ... but even if he did, you're meant to have people you can trust, not someone who's running off to the papers as soon as she says something.

**Colette** It probably is hard for them, like; you don't know who you can trust, do you?

**Danni** You let them into your house and then they just...

**Sophie** ... but I think...

**Colette** ... if you won the lottery now, you wouldn't know who your friends were...

**Danni** ... well, you would but...

**Colette** ... you'd be really wary, if you went out and you met someone and they said, "Oh, you're really lovely, I really like you" – it's not like it would be when you used to just go out, it would be so different, like, are they just being my friend because I've got loads of money or because..?

**Julie** ... I think really in life if that did happen it's all about taking a chance, and you have to take a chance to find out who your friends are.

**Colette** They obviously want to be like celebrities, though it's their decision, isn't it?

**Julie** Yeah, but, like, that if they think she's good enough to look after the kids, then you're gonna hire them...

**All** Yeah.

**Julie** ... she didn't hire them to be her best friend, did she?

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<sup>49</sup> *When Jordan Met Peter* 2005, *Jordan & Peter: Laid Bare* 2005, *Jordan & Peter: Marriage Mayhem?* 2005, *Katie & Peter: The Baby Diaries* 2007 and *Katie & Peter: The Next Chapter* 2007, ITV, Can Associates TV.

**Lornette** She probably got offered a lot of money for it, and money does change a lot – it's like, say, you won the lottery; not all your friends but some would change toward you...

**Sophie** Yeah... you do believe what you read. I know you shouldn't, but you do because you're quite consumed by it, so if that's all the impression that you're getting, then it does create a first...

**Sophie** I think you are right. I think we do look at them as our friends in a way, it's the way we're, like, "Oh, look at her and..."

**Julie** We actually do because, you know, you have certain people in your life that, you know, is such a bitch and you say I wish she would just piss off and you do that with them as well, as it's like the same kind of language that you would use towards your friends. But not all of them, 'cos I think someone who is, like, near to our age group, you are more inclined to talk about like that.

Julie is articulating the group's response to age and television presenters – an assumption I made throughout my analysis of these transcripts. To some extent age and class do have some bearing on the way the group discusses its expectations of women in the media. The younger presenters, Willoughby, Cotton, Chung and to some extent Price, are inspected for their potential as friends. Julie explains that she uses the presenters in the same way she would a friend. This is an interesting relationship and not one that suggests these women are role models for the group.

**Lornette** I think it's, like, they're always in your face. When you turn on the TV you see them in magazines... you want them to be who... because they are on TV... [the recording is not clear here on what Lornette actually says].

I have not been able to clearly make out what Lornette is saying in this sentence, but she appears to be struggling to articulate what she would like these women to be for her. Again, a more experienced researcher may have queried her on this point, and I feel this is a missed opportunity.

## Choice

*On Davina McCall*

**Julie** She... I don't know it does, because it shows that although you make mistakes in life you can pick yourself up – she's, like, a mother now to two children.

**Colette** She's got loads, hasn't she?

**Danni** She's pregnant again, isn't she?

**Julie** I thought she only had two; anyway, she's turned herself around... She's a good representation of real people – everyone makes mistakes and, you know...

These comments are using the narrative of choice for Davina McCall. Her past history of drug and alcohol abuse is well-documented in the press, and McCall herself has discussed her earlier life in interviews<sup>50</sup>. The group sees her life choices as open-ended, whereby she is not defined by her past and is capable of endless improvement. The group recognises that these female presenters experience a range of choices in their media lives. To take Salecl's (2010) point here, she discusses the notion of the tyranny of choice; the fear of making the wrong choice can define you as a failing individual. This group discusses with interest the choices these presenters make, possibly using these experiences as a conceptual tool to evaluate risk in their own lives and, to some extent, to map these choices against their understanding of the landscape of contemporary girlhood.

It is also worth noting here that McRobbie's "good girl" and "bad girl" (2001) notion is not taken up by the group in this context. They see McCall's past history of drug and alcohol addiction, and her subsequent recovery, as evidence of choice, and Julie comments 'everyone makes mistakes'.

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<sup>50</sup> Singh, A., 'McCall: Television is bad for children', *The Telegraph* (online) 5<sup>th</sup> January 2010. 'McCall, who is married to former television presenter Matthew Robinson, had a difficult childhood and is a former drug addict. "You name it, I took it. Cocaine, ecstasy, even heroin," she said. "I try to go to a 12-step fellowship meeting every week. I've been going for 17 years and no-one's ever blown my anonymity. I feel safer in one of those meetings talking to a bunch of strangers than I do anywhere in the world." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/big-brother/6936222/Davina-McCall-television-is-bad-for-children.html> (accessed January 2010).

**Julie** I think really in life, if that did happen it's all about taking a chance and you have to take a chance to find out who your friends are.

**Colette** They obviously want to be like celebrities, though it's their decision, isn't it?

**AWY** Who's the one who's had a stomach band – she's been in the newspaper recently?

**All** Fern Britton.

**Julie** I love her.

**Rachel** When she's on *GMTV* with that bloke – they laugh so much, it's so funny.

**Julie** The problem is her husband said she lost the weight through healthy eating and exercise, but she didn't...

**Sophie** She probably didn't want everyone to know. If she doesn't feel comfortable with her body and she wants to do something...

**Colette** Yeah, but if it's all Botoxed and collagened, then...

**Danni** Did she actually say she did loads of exercise?

**Colette** No, her husband did.

**Danni** So she didn't actually say it?

**Colette** She didn't deny it though.

This discussion supports the notion of choice: 'If she doesn't feel comfortable with her body and she wants to do something...'. The inference here is that Fern Britton has the right to choose what her body should look like. It is not the decision by Britton to undertake surgery that is treated with suspicion by the group, but her dishonesty, which is discussed as "a problem." Press (2011) refers to the idea of the 'emancipated new femininity; the right to be beautiful' in her discussion of advertising campaigns aimed at women:

An "emancipated femininity" is construed in the ads as liberation and freedom from women's self-restrictions. Self-restrictions, which hold women back from living fully and freely, may be embodied or attitudinal...(2011, p.39).

These girls hold common assumptions about the perfect body image. That Britton is unhappy with her image is understood, and the choices available to the presenter are also accepted as self-improvement strategies. Whether the group accepts that these strategies will bring about the liberation and freedom identified by Press is never really addressed by the group, although the members do show suspicion at being addressed in magazines as lacking the ideal body image. Colette's comments discussed earlier, "cos, if, like, you look at people in magazines you think, well she's stupid or look at her she's tiny she's dieting ...and she's this and she's that" suggest a lack of investment in ideal images of beauty. Gill (2008) suggests that a post-feminist media culture urges us to reassess and transform ourselves constantly. By addressing us in this way, women (as it is women more than men) become ill at ease with their self-assessment and begin to search for what is lacking in their life. The antidote to this ill ease is the make-over culture ubiquitous in all media texts: 'It started with food and homes and gardens, but has now extended to clothing, cleanliness, work, dating, sex, cosmetic surgery and raising children' (2008 p.441). These girls appear to be struggling with these narratives of choice and transformation, and they appear to take as a given that everyone wants to be able to transform themselves, albeit they also see the way that this can become overwhelming.

*A discussion based on a summary of the group's comments about how the presenters should behave.*

**Lornette**        What we're saying is, like, show everything off but not show everything.

**Rachel**        Yeah, you can do it.

**Lornette**        There's a middle ground somewhere...

This is a response to those presenters who display an overly sexualised image of themselves, and as a result the group urges these women to exercise restraint. This advice, I suggest, is again sisterly in intent. If we consider the heightened emotion the group felt when discussing the sexualised images

of presenters in relation to male attention, then it suggests that the group is warning the presenters against the dangers of this kind of attention: 'Show everything off but [don't] show everything', i.e. be in control of your own image and don't be embarrassing to us, as we are the monitors of your behaviour. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the vigilance with which the teenage girls engage with the images of these television presenters is a complex system of checking and monitoring behaviour, as the women are seen as representational and are used as a sort of weather vane to assess the temperature of the female landscape.

**AWY** So there's a middle ground. So it seems to me that you said they had to have a balance of femininity, presentability, likeability...

**Julie** Fuckin' hell, I'm never going to be a TV presenter!

**AWY** ...dramatic narrative, business sense...

**Julie** Bloody hell!

**Colette** Oh my God!

**AWY** ... not too aggressive, and most importantly you have to be real. So that's a lot you're asking from these people.

**Julie** Nobody is going to fit to that, nobody's going to be that...

**Sophie** Too right, you've got that money you do the job right. (Laughing).

Laughter from group

**Lornette** Can I just say – they are presenters, they've got to put their name on the show or whatever – they should work for it, if they want to do it, then ...

Once the group members heard my assessment of their expectations of female presenters, they appeared to have felt genuine amazement at how demanding they had been throughout the sessions. Julie comments:

**Julie** You're critical because they're representing you.



This is a crucial comment from Julie, as it appears to encapsulate much of the emotion and sense of focus the group applies to their assessment of the television presenters' behaviour and lifestyle.

Lornette's comment, 'they should work for it', supports the idea that the group places a critical expectation on women in the media spotlight. "Working for it" suggests earning their place, but not through sexualised images (Holly Willoughby), appearing to be stupid (*Big Brother* contestants) or by placing themselves in jeopardy in male-dominated situations (Claudia Winkleman); instead, these women should be mindful to be faithful to other women and recognise that they should appeal to men for the purpose of furthering their career (Katie Price), not because they enjoy the attention (Holly Willoughby). To clarify, the group has a critical, evaluative and "assessing and checking" engagement with the personas of female television presenters, which is contrary to any initial ideas I may have held that these women were role models for teenage girls.

#### *On the media*

**Colette** It's just because it's all mediatised, like; people get divorced and people get sick, like. I know it was really awful, like, when Kylie Minogue got cancer... everyone, loads, so many people have cancer, I don't know why it makes her so fuckin' important.

**Danni** Like Jade Goody...

All of the group exclaim in loud groans.

**Julie** I... Jade Goody didn't have, erm, if she didn't go what she went through she would not have been in the limelight as much as she was... after that racist thing she just went completely downhill... nobody had anything to do with her, only because she had a terrible illness. I'm not saying... I wouldn't wish that on anyone, but that's the only reason why.

**Rachel** If she didn't get cancer she would still be the racist bitch...

**Julie** Exactly, she wouldn't have a waxwork in Madame Tussauds.

#### *On Jordan*

**AWY**      How long do you think Jordan/Katie Price will be around?

**Sophie**    She'll be around for a while.

**Julie**      She'll be famous for a very long time... for a very long time because even if she stops the books and the perfume and stuff, she'll still be famous for what she's done and ...

**Danni**      ... and her kids when they grow up will be, like, "Yeah, my Mum's Jordan."

## Conclusion

In this concluding chapter I would like to reflect on how the female presenters discussed in my fieldwork are “used” by young women and how this can contribute to academic work on new femininities. I have observed that teenage girls appear to have quite an intense relationship with female presenters, which is evidenced through their extended and involved conversations about the women which are well-informed and meaningful. I initially misunderstood the nature of this relationship, as it looked like one of a role model and pupil. I had made some stereotypical and, in retrospect, oversimplified assumptions about young girls and media images. Furthermore, I had found the idea that some of these girls were interested in becoming television presenters themselves a superficial career choice, and I assumed that their rationale was because they lacked any feminist principles. By this, I mean that I had interpreted their interest in television presenters as an investment in glamorous and sometimes sexualised images of women as role models for the construction of their own sexualised selves. I saw this as a type of seduction of the girls by stereotypical media images of women. In some ways I think I was exasperated by their apparent superficiality and felt the urge to “show them the way” forward, by applying a feminist perspective. Having now completed my research I realise the naivety of my assumptions; the very complex relationships girls have with these presenters is not aspirational but rather representational. In addition, their understanding of a feminist perspective may not be the same as mine, but they do establish “sisterly” relationships both with each other and with the women on screen, creating what for me is a new perspective on girlhood and feminism. This viewpoint complements recent reappraisals of what feminism means for young girls. Brunsdon (2013) and Rowe Karlyn (2013), discussed in Chapter 1, both reference the ways in which feminism and post-feminism are not always regarded by young women as meaningful terms and concepts and are disconnected from young people’s lives. Rowe Karlyn suggests that girls are inventing feminism on their own terms. Acknowledging this disconnectedness, Brunsdon considers what happens next for feminism and

asks ‘where do we go from here?’ (Brunsdon, 2013). I will continue this discussion throughout this chapter and also revisit Rowe Carlyn and Brunsdon’s ideas.

Returning to the focus group, and to clarify, I am using the term “representational” to identify how the young women in my focus group were able to discuss female television presenters in a way which suggested that these women are held up as arbiters of acceptable and unacceptable female conduct in a male-dominated television landscape. I identified the term “sisterly” once I had recognised that the practice of checking, monitoring and assessing female presenters’ behaviour is representational. The subsequent collective acknowledgement by the research group that women behave in ways that are responses to masculinity, patriarchy and a political economy, I suggest, is “sisterly” in tone and intent. This thesis explores this phenomenon, which is my contribution to the debates on contemporary girlhood. The girls’ sense of jeopardy for both themselves as subjects and for the women with whom they are involved has a constant presence throughout the fieldwork. The “knowing” of masculine ideals and their simultaneous resistance to and compliance with these ideals is fascinating, and it belies some assumptions in feminist studies that girls are “worked on” by dominant and patriarchal ideologies.

My research shows that female television presenters sometimes outnumber their male counterparts, and in this way this could suggest that women have equal opportunities within broadcast media. Female presenters are highly visible and seem to be taking charge of their own careers. For example, Holly Willoughby, Fearne Cotton and Davina McCall all appear to travel effortlessly across media platforms and front successful primetime broadcast shows. They also have a heavy and frequent presence in print media as well as online followings. Willoughby and Cotton have designed and fronted their own line of clothing for *very.co.uk*, and Davina McCall has appeared on the career advice website for young people *icould.com*, where she can be seen discussing her

successful career. It is of little surprise, then, that these women may be regarded by young girls as models of success. Any attempt on my part to engage girls in post-feminist debates about gender equality and other feminist principles would be difficult to instigate and sustain, because these kinds of conversations are felt by teenagers to be irrelevant to their own lives.

Some of my assumptions before I began this research were that girls were able to identify and consolidate images of femininity through the relationships they created with female television presenters and then to use these images to inform their own life as a kind of model of success and therefore as aspirational figures in their lives. This now seems a little simplistic as an ideological construct, as my own understanding of cultural studies through academic study should have informed me that there are many other possibilities and that the relationships these girls build are complex and interactive. However, in my own defence, some of the conversations I had overheard between teenage girls had led me to make these assumptions, and whilst my academic self logically reasoned with the flawed nature of the concept of the mass audience and media texts as unified sites of textual consumption, my more traditional feminist self experienced a visceral knee jerk response to comments from 16-year-old girls, such as:

I would love to be a television presenter, except I never will be – I'm not pretty or glamorous enough... (Hayley, aged 16, 2006).

She's so tall and elegant; I could never be like that... She always has a style, she's a fashion icon... I want to look like her... but I never will... (Katarina, aged 16, on Cat Deeley, 2006)

You can earn lots of money. You can spend it on yourself – it's easy and you don't need an education... (Sammy, aged 17, 2006).

Whilst the first two comments sound quite wistful and contribute enormously to ideas that young girls are powerfully (and negatively) affected by media images, the third comment is, in my experience, also somewhat typical, as it suggests that glamour and fame are easier routes in life and do not involve hard work and attention to detail but rather luck and physical attractiveness. This

therefore negates any imperative to be academically ambitious and actually derides the notion of academic achievement: being a celebrity is easier and more desirable. However, given the amount of research I have now carried out, my initial assessment of how these young girls discuss celebrities is probably far too simplistic. The focus group transcripts reveal a complex set of responses to female presenters and are a reflection of how teenage girls draw on and create dialogues using media narratives. The transcripts are grouped and themed using the discourses that young girls and women are encouraged to engage with within a neoliberal landscape. These discourses have been identified by academics such as McRobbie as ways in which contemporary attitudes towards feminism have been influenced and directed. In particular it is the way in which notions of feminism and feminist principles are seemingly overlooked by the research group that brings into focus McRobbie's misgivings about post-feminism. McRobbie argues that:

Post-feminism actively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, a spent force (2004, p.4).

McRobbie suggests further that the common perception and acceptance that feminism is taken into account actually enables the 'thorough dismantling of feminist politics'. Adding to this debate, and my understanding, Gill (2007) suggests that contemporary feminism is multifaceted and dynamic, making it difficult to propose one single appraisal of how feminism works for women. In agreement with McRobbie, Gill accepts that the popular perception is that feminism is taken into account and is therefore a redundant concept for young women. This is apparent through the highly visible and media-friendly representations of successful women (described earlier). However, Gill also recognises that there is still evidence of 'boring and predictable patterns of sexism' such as the lack of older women on television. In contrast to these predictable patterns of sexism, she (2007, p. 20) notes that 'the Web is home to an enormous diversity of feminist ideas ranging from support against breast cancer to "babes against the bomb."' What contemporary feminism therefore constitutes, and how it manifests itself, is not so easy to quantify, and it is this lack of clarity that has

propelled my research. My research group was resistant to using the lexis of feminism and superficially accepted that it is taken into account as described by McRobbie. However, they also recognised (albeit minimally) that women do not have the same opportunities as men in many cases. Their unfamiliarity with any feminist principles to articulate their understandings of inequality means that they are unprepared for any coherent engagement with issues facing contemporary girlhood.

As discussed in Chapter 5, McRobbie's analysis of the way that women are addressed in magazines in the 1990s 'speak of a crisis, or at least a tension, in what it is to be a woman now' (2004, p.178). This allusion to crisis or tension is an interesting turn, as McRobbie highlights the issue that I feel I witnessed in my fieldwork with teenage girls. Members of the research group articulated their unease through conversations about women in the media that showed, amongst other emotions, anger, hostility and disparagement. I suggest that this is a form of crisis inasmuch as they were not confident in their view of the world and their place therein. It is of interest to see from where this may have originated. McRobbie identified a point in time where women began to be addressed as confident, bold and highly sexual, which is the legacy for the teenagers in my research group. The shift in the way women are addressed developed, according to McRobbie, between magazine production in the 1980s and 1990s (members of the focus group were born in the early '90s) – a shift which she identifies as sociological in origin.

McRobbie (2001) argues that when the Labour Party came to power in 1997, part of their agenda was to place women and girls at the heart of social policy. She identifies that the government at the time used women as 'metaphors for social change' (1997, p.361), in order to reflect government achievements and anxieties. These ideas are further supported by the press coverage of young women, particularly women's magazines and the *Daily Mail*. These publications served to celebrate

“girl power,” profile top women earners and also to identify what McRobbie terms “good girls” and “bad girls” (1997, p.367). McRobbie sees the danger of the “bad girl” image being adopted by right-wing politics and “good girls” becoming icons of conservative values.

This contribution by McRobbie to ideas about feminism and young women gives a clear and innovative perspective on why young women may not understand feminist principles. If they are being addressed as individuals, competent and free to make their own decisions, then the idea of feminism would seem redundant. My research group, on the other hand, did not appear to use feminist principles as a way of thinking and acting, and nor did they see themselves as free and empowered individuals – the group were neither “good girls” nor “bad girls.” Some were economically disadvantaged because they were from single-parent homes; however, they were not necessarily socially disadvantaged because of the location of their homes (a middle-class area in an affluent county). Whilst I find McRobbie’s notion of “good girls” and “bad girls” innovative, I find the process of testing this idea very challenging.

Additionally, whilst it is important to consider the consequences of New Labour, the recent Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, formed after the 2010 General Election, has produced its own set of consequences for women. The austerity package of economic cuts implemented by the Coalition appears to impact significantly on the lives of women (both good girls and bad girls). A recent report by the UK Women’s Budget Group (UK WBG) (2011) highlights the impact of the 2011 budget and suggests that changes to the Child Tax Credit, the Working Tax Credit, the Bedroom Tax, public sector pay freezes and changes to public sector pensions have all had more damaging consequences for women than for men:

In the UK today, economic inequality between women and men remains persistent and entrenched. In general, women earn less, own less and are more likely to live in poverty than men. This not only limits women’s financial power and freedom but also hinders their full participation in public life, including in positions of power and influence... The budget fails



to address the issue of women's employment. It is now clear that hundreds of thousands of women will lose their jobs in the coming year. The number of unemployed men has begun to fall, but the number of women who are unemployed is rising. If current trends continue, women's rate of unemployment will be higher than that of men... Whilst unemployment is devastating for anyone, regardless of their gender, access to the jobs market has been the single greatest factor in securing economic autonomy for women and has hence been instrumental in reducing economic inequality between women and men (UK WBG, 2011).

These figures, issued by the UK WBG, challenge McRobbie's notion of women as metaphors for positive social change, which is not too surprising given that there has been a change of government since McRobbie made these claims. The report suggests that the austerity budget serves to unfairly disadvantage women, which may have disastrous consequences for their representation in the workplace. The report goes on to identify that more women aged 18-24 are unemployed than males in the same age group. The future for young women seeking employment therefore appears bleak, which may have consequences for how they engage with images of women in the media, with feminist ideas and with their own self-worth. The girls in the focus group did not demonstrate any significant confidence about their own futures, as their discussions mostly focused on completing their current course, while some of them were planning on university. Only one student demonstrated real aspiration to complete a course in journalism, while the others were less focused and did not seem to have a purposeful strategy. I subsequently learnt that one of the focus members dropped out of university within the first year, and one other left before she completed her degree, as she had a child and decided that she could not combine university and childcare. The lack of purposeful direction exhibited by this group may be a consequence of their background and of financial constraints upon single-parent families – the one student who successfully completed her degree is from a two-parent household, which may be a contributory factor to her success.

McRobbie suggested that 'a new form of feminist sociality' (2001, p. 363) might have emerged when women's experiences of New Labour did not fit with their own experiences in the real world. This is difficult to evidence and qualify; my own research attempts to identify signs of a feminist

sociality and I have found this a task laden with ambiguity and conjecture. In recent years, a grassroots movement has begun to emerge in big cities, with young women very much involved in confronting gender inequality; for instance, *UK Feminista*, which was founded in 2010 to campaign for political, economic and social equality, is a good example of this movement. However, subsequent economic conditions and the coalition government's approach to the national debt have ensured that this sociality becomes ever more difficult to establish and develop. A growing number of unemployed and low-paid women who are unable to contribute to the workforce will restrict the exchange and flow of feminist ideas. My experience of young girls in my institution is that their home lives are being disrupted because of the implementation of new benefit systems. Families are finding that they are unsure of how to cope with benefit cuts and changes to their entitlements, which results in students choosing when to attend college based on restrictive and costly travel fares. This kind of choice will clearly impact on the educational progress of these vulnerable students.

McRobbie's description of "postmodern knowingness," where feminism is taken into account and discarded, is very relevant, as it reflects the behaviour of female television presenters in the media and how these actions are read by audiences. For example, Davina McCall, the host of *Big Brother*, and her appearance on the show dressed only in a bikini (C4 *Endemol* 2006) as an ironic gesture presents exactly this "post-modern knowingness." How do teenage girls respond to this kind of address? The idea of the "good girl" is also of interest. However, I think teenage girls respond more positively to TV presenters who have had negative reputations but have turned their life around. Using McCall as an example, she has a history of drug and alcohol dependence, and this kind of dramatic narrative often drives the conversations of teenage girls. What has become increasingly clear to me is that the young girls in my research group were born into an era (the 1990s) where feminism and feminist ideals were not necessarily discussed using a balanced argument. The

sexualisation of media images of women (and men) became commonplace in this period, and these girls have grown up without a clear understanding of a feminist past. It is interesting to consider what kind of compass they use to navigate the increasingly individualised and fragmented media landscape.

## **Post-feminism**

When I began this work, the hyper-sexualisation of young women, and particularly of young girls, had ignited intense debate amongst feminist academics such as McRobbie (2001, 2004, 2005, 2009), Gill (2006, 2007, 2008, 2011), Walter (2010), Levy (2005) and Banyard (2010). The central concern amongst these academics was that the media landscape was populated by seemingly empowered images of women. It is this idea of empowerment that is examined by these writers for validity. They refute the assumption that feminism as a movement is redundant and assess the impact of the hyper-sexualisation of women in the media as an empowering act. Recent feminist research (Banyard, 2010; Walters, 2010; Aune and Redfern, 2010) has identified how feminist principles have been discarded in contemporary society. And, in part, the exploration of the hyper-sexualisation of girls and women has become the focus for feminist debate. Therefore, media images, including the creation of reality television and celebrity lifestyles, have come under close scrutiny because of the role they play in creating unrealistic representations of femininity and then re-presenting these back to young women. Madeleine Jowett's (2004) research presents the possibility that, given the space to reflect, young women may be able to re-engage with feminism and learn how to negotiate the sophisticated media terrain. I would like to examine the findings of my own research in these more positive terms. My research group's discussions of female television presenters provide an opportunity to identify how teenage girls negotiate and identify with these representations of femininity and how they reflect on their own self-identity.

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Madeleine Jowett (2004) created a research group of 26 women, aged between 16 and 28, with the purpose of examining the assumptions that feminist ideas have become redundant for young women. Jowett sets out to investigate how young women negotiate feminism in contemporary Britain. Whilst she acknowledges that on the whole young women have ‘disinvested in feminism’ (2004, p.91), she also asserts that it is possible for new understandings of feminism to develop, if young women are given the space to reflect on how feminist ideas can connect with their lives. Drawing on McRobbie’s work, Jowett uses as evidence for her claims the rhetoric of the then New Labour government, where ‘powerful discourses of progress, achievement, and optimism’ (2004, p.91) communicate to young women that feminist ideas are no longer relevant for contemporary society.

Jowett found in her research that young women were reluctant to articulate the existence of gender inequality, preferring instead to make the uncritical assumption that while some inequality probably exists, on the whole society is progressively improving. Jowett cites one of her focus group, Emma:

Emma, echoing many of her peers, simply stated, “The next generation will be able to take it for granted.” She could not explain how this would be accomplished, nor could she visualise any obstructions (Jowett 2004, p.95)<sup>51</sup>.

This kind of optimism is coupled with a discourse of entitlement, whereby young women are offered the idea that choice and opportunity are easily available. This creates a sense of identity amongst young women which, according to Walkerdine, ‘silences the articulation and experiences of inequality’ (2001, p.52). What Walkerdine suggests here is that society creates an illusion of equality whereby individuals notionally accept the idea and feel entitled to be part thereof.

Therefore, any experience of inequality is difficult to articulate, as to accept that we are all equal in

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<sup>51</sup> For women, the consequences of the policies implemented by the coalition government are becoming apparent, and this may have a bearing on how young women engage with feminist ideas. The disempowering of women through austerity measures described earlier in this work could serve to further sideline feminism, or equally it could mobilise feminist discourses.

society ‘removes the entitlement to feel encumbered by it’ (2001, p.95). This is a very important and useful point, in that the young women during my initial conversations were very reluctant to discuss – and were actually quite uncomfortable with – the words “feminist” or “feminism.” Quite clearly for them there is a sense of redundancy around these words. Although they were able to articulate that gender differences exist, these were consequences of the choices individuals had made, and they were not a consequence of inequality. However, Jowett suggests that whilst her focus group was critical of the idea of feminism today, they did accept that feminist ideas and principles had been necessary in the past:

Hayley: my mum used to be a feminist, she went to Greenham Common in the 1980s. She hated men then; she was put upon, so she was a feminist then... She’s not like that now, she’s got a good life... I don’t think feminism’s relevant today (2004, p.96).

These comments suggest that feminism for young women is a part of the past and not adaptable to contemporary life. Jowett suggests that the group recognised that feminism once had a place in people’s lives; however, negative images and connotations are still attached to feminist ideology. The members of the group felt that they were in control of their own lives and could bring about change as individuals, while feminists were viewed negatively and were seen as irrelevant: ‘Such feminists were seen as ludicrous and at best pitiable or comical...’ (2004, p. 97).

During my own research, teenage girls expressed similar thoughts. In the focus group, four of the six girls were from single-parent families (three living with their mothers and one with her father) and the three expressed their mistrust of their mothers’ choices in male partners. Mostly they were anxious not to be in relationships where they would be put into a position of economic and social vulnerability by males, as they had witnessed this through their mothers’ experiences. However, this was accepted by the girls as an inevitable consequence of relationships, not a consequence of any

inequalities in opportunities available for single parents. Another group member, Rachel, in a discussion about her mother, suggested that she earns less than her father because she chooses to spend more time at home, which is not linked in any way to outside pressures and is seen by Rachel as a life choice made by her mother and also linked to childcare responsibilities in the home. During conversations on a broader scale, I have experienced girls rationalising the way that mothers take the greater responsibility for childcare in the home as natural and an inevitable consequence of gender relations. The term “the personal is political,” commonly used amongst second-wave feminists to identify how personal experiences are both connected to and a consequence of a political economy, is clearly unknown and unexplored for these young women. The idea of choice and opportunity that McRobbie and Jowett accurately identify is a ubiquitous narrative visible across a number of discourses. For any adult it is difficult to experience these narratives without being seduced in some way by their possibilities, so for less experienced young women it must be even harder. My more recent observations of teenage girls in my classrooms are that they are more aware than previous students of the term “feminism,” as it is used across many discourses. They are, however, not overly familiar with what feminism means for them, and their channels of communication are social networking sites and in particular *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. These sites present bite-sized pieces of information about any subject, and in doing so girls experience a barely perceptible background narrative of contemporary feminist ideas. In conversations these girls acknowledge feminism but are not able to develop a dialogue beyond acknowledging that the term is becoming more familiar and is in common use.

It is this ambivalence that recent publications on feminism (Banyard, 2010; Aune and Redfern, 2010; Walter, 1998, 2010) all seek to examine. Natasha Walter’s (2010) research is in some ways a response to her own earlier work (1998), in which she reassesses the idea that young women are disregarding feminist ideas and principles and suggests that they are creating a new more pragmatic

feminism that replaces a more traditional second wave of feminism. In her later work, Walter concedes that she may have been overoptimistic about the new kinds of feminism, and through interviews and research she sets out a picture of young women in contemporary life. Walter focuses on the hyper-sexualisation of girls and recognises that despite more than 200 years of feminist thought, ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>52</sup> (1792) to Germaine Greer<sup>53</sup> (1971), women are still defined by their physical appearance. Sexuality is a defining feature for young women, which is underpinned by an array of media images of women celebrating representations of their sexuality in film, television, music and magazines. These images produce increasingly narrow ideas of what women should look like and confirm, according to Walter, that ‘female sexuality has become more than ever defined by the terms of the sex industry’ (2010, p.3). Using personal interviews with women and girls, Walter examines the realities of the sex industry and the notion of empowerment and choice amongst pole dancers and sex workers. She notes that the number of lap dancing clubs has risen ‘from a handful of clubs in the 1990s, to an estimated three hundred clubs in the UK in 2008’ (2010, p.40). She examines the commonly held assumption by many young women that working in a lap dancing club is potentially liberating, providing freedom and flexibility to be in charge of their own earning potential. Walter states that more and more women who work in these clubs choose to do so because they expect to earn a good living, which in turn will allow them to pay off existing debts and therefore become more financially secure. She points out that lap dancing clubs have become part of mainstream culture and cites UK model and celebrity Kate Moss, actress Emilia Fox and pop stars The Sugababes, who have all publicly supported lap dancing clubs and

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<sup>52</sup> Wollstonecraft, M., 1792, *A Vindication of the rights of Woman with strictures on political and moral subjects*. This publication is commonly accepted as the first feminist treatise.

<sup>53</sup> Greer, G., 1971, *The Female Eunuch*, a book about gender inequality which became an international bestseller.

made reference to their empowering properties.<sup>54</sup> This research by Walter draws on Ariel Levy's (2005) work, which points to the rise of what she terms 'raunch culture', where women are increasingly being sold the idea of empowerment through displays of hyper-sexuality, thus questioning the integrity of this form of empowerment:

How is resurrecting every stereotype of female sexuality that feminists endeavoured to banish good for women? Why is labouring to look like Pamela Anderson empowering? And how is imitating a stripper or porn star – a woman whose job is to imitate arousal in the first place – going to render us sexually liberated (2005, p.4)?

In her interviews with women who worked as pole dancers, Walter found that they were disenchanted with the process, and the realities of their job were far from the empowering vision they had originally envisaged. Financially, the women found themselves exploited by club owners, and a dancer could end an evening's work with 'less money than she started with' (2010, p.45). Kat Banyard's (2010) research on women and gender equality attempts to dispel the myth that lap dancing is empowering, and it also makes a case for exploitation. Banyard interviews a lap dancer who explains that it is actually possible to lose money. From the outset, she found she was in debt to the club and could be fined for many reasons, thereby increasing the debt. The decision to move into the sex industry had been made casually by many of the women interviewed by both Banyard and Walter. Representations of lap dancers in the media through celebrity and media endorsement had given the women unrealistic expectations and an altered perception of the sex industry as socially acceptable and almost reputable. Walter remarks that it is no longer seen as a 'seedy sex industry – rather, it has become seen more as a cheeky part of the entertainment industry' (2010, p.41). It is this readjustment in young women's perceptions that appears to be at the core of the recent research around feminist and post-feminist perspectives. The question feminist authors are

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<sup>54</sup> Fox, E., 2008, "I think it's the most amazing thing and believe me, women get a lot more out of it than men do" *Daily Mail*, (online) available at, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-559002/Emilia-Fox-noble-art-pole-dancing-learned-undress-husband.html#ixzz1mMukGhJl> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2010).



asking is how do young women in contemporary society understand and engage with feminist ideas? Also, how can notions of empowerment in a hyper-sexualised environment become connected to and inscribed with feminist principles? In my experience, teenage girls are routinely confronted by sexualised images of women, their own conversations are fairly explicitly sexual in nature and they display a casualness that belies their years. In some respects this may be bravado and a response to the ubiquity of sexualised images all around them. The focus group in my assessment were not able to accept sexualised images of presenters without disapproval and discussion, which suggests that given the opportunity and space, girls can reveal a distaste for the hyper-sexualisation of women. In more recent discussions I have had with teenage girls there is a sense of defeatist acceptance about sexualised images of women. Their understanding of the representation of the female body in the media is that these are unrealistic images. They have been deluged with the disparagement of female celebrities in print and online throughout their teenage years, and they have now become disengaged from any dialogue that seeks to explore the consequences of the hyper-sexualisation of women.

Walter interviewed a range of women regarding their own body image, making specific reference to five women who had recently received their degrees from Oxford University. The negativity they displayed towards their own image was, in Walter's view, life-limiting: 'I never really eat without feeling guilty', said one, while another concurred: 'From the age of 13 to 17 I couldn't put anything in my mouth without worrying' (2010, p.123).

Walter suggests that the narcissism at play here, where the women are focused on body image, is self-restricting. This may impact negatively on their career choices, and this self-limiting attitude coupled with a gendered pay gap serves to perpetuate real inequality between women and men. The evidence that Walter collects is persuasive and alarming. She argues that women and young girls are disproportionately focused on body image and that this is a consequence of media images, politics

and economics. The expectations are that, the ubiquitous nature of the discourses of hyper-sexuality, narcissism and “choice” are so pervasive that women and young girls would be unable to resist. However, my research group were able to articulate these inequalities, and they also demonstrated a critical understanding of how hyper-sexualised images created negative connotations. This is not to say that their articulations were agentic, as the participants were not in my experience advocating a way forward. However, they were clearly struggling with the way they negotiated the world described by Walter. As I have discussed earlier, more recent conversations with teenage girls about sexualisation suggest that they are exhibiting a detachment from any inquiring dialogue around sexualised images of women. This suggests for me weariness and disengagement with neoliberalism and its notions of choice and empowerment, as discussed in Chapter 3.

## **Inequality and the media**

Kat Banyard’s (2010) work sets out to reveal the inequality that is still in existence in contemporary British society. Her work examines women’s relationships with their body image, inequalities in education and employment, domestic violence, the sex industry and reproductive rights for women. Banyard suggests that whilst there exist significant inequalities in all these areas of life, most young people are rarely taught about gender inequality and have to discover it (or not) for themselves. In an attempt to rectify this issue, Banyard set up the FEM<sup>55</sup> conference in 2004 with the aim to bring gender inequality back into focus. The popularity of this conference and the growing trend for other grass roots movements about gender suggested to Banyard that there is willingness amongst women to advocate and set an agenda for change.

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<sup>55</sup> FEM – a UK national conference on women’s rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its aim is to inspire people to get involved in campaigns for gender equality.

Banyard identifies the notion of choice as a guiding principle for many women. This is the idea that women can feel empowered by their decisions and actions through a number of life choices that will enhance their lives. Banyard suggests that it is precisely these choices that ‘reflect gender inequality’ (2010, p.22), as they are focused so heavily on body image. She identifies dieting, plastic surgery, weight loss and makeovers as part of the ways in which women exercise choice, and it is this focus on body image that is restrictive and preserves the notion of objectification. Banyard suggests that girls are taught from an early age the importance of physical appearance, and the underlying assumptions understood by these girls is that it is more important to be beautiful than clever. This understanding, according to Banyard, results in girls retreating into an internalised (and therefore unspoken and unqualified) assessment of their own bodies, which in turn leads to self-objectification. In this way, girls no longer see themselves as individuals but as a series of physical attributes that have to be constantly checked and improved upon. Banyard suggests that young girls often identify the media as a leading and influential factor in determining an ideal body image, and she identifies this comment by a 15-year-old girl, ‘The main character works for *Vogue* but she hardly goes to work. I would love to have her lifestyle’ (2010, p.27) as evidence of this influence. Whilst this is a very seductive assumption to make – that girls are directly influenced by media images – it is also very simplistic and reductive and is very different from the conversations with young girls that sparked my own research project. The girls in my research group, I concluded, were very aware of the ways in which the media can attempt to be influential. This awareness alone suggests that the process of audience consumption of media images does not fit the hypodermic model and that some negotiation is taking place.

Aune and Redfern (2010) look at the influence of media images on women and men and attempt to apply a feminist perspective by examining the range of representations present in media texts and, more importantly, determine how audiences engage with these images. The authors maintain that

gender stereotyping is most prevalent in television advertising. They found that images of women in adverts were 'younger, more silent, and occupy domestic roles' (2010, p.176). However, they also note that despite the entrenched inequality present in media images, women are being presented with the idea that they are empowered and liberated and that by buying the products on offer they can maintain this freedom. The authors refer to McRobbie's (2005) idea of 'feminism taken into account' here and describe how media images draw on feminist principles to sell products. Aune and Redfern also make reference to 'ironic sexual objectification' (2010, p 177) whereby exaggerated stereotypical views are presented in media advertising using sexualised images of women. These images are presented ironically, and the apparent "sexism" is excused by acknowledging that in past times this kind of stereotyping would have been seen as sexist. However, today we are all more sophisticated in our understanding of media messages, and so to find this offensive would suggest we lack of a sense of humour. These ideas by Aune and Redfern are in keeping with Walkerdine's (2001), in that inequality is often silenced by our own acceptance of equality. By notionally accepting the idea that we live in an equal society, we effectively remove the opportunity to speak out against the unequal treatment of men and women. I would suggest that many young girls have not had the experience of a feminist education as a point of reference for the interpretation of the way they are addressed in the media. Therefore, it is far more difficult to translate the postmodern irony at work here. I recognised during my focus group sessions an underlying sensibility around the discourses of choice, hyper-sexuality and equality. Members of the research group were often angered by sexualised images of women in television, and their conversations suggested they were not taken in by the rhetoric described by Aune and Redfern, while they also displayed a sense of jeopardy. This sense was not articulated in any coherent detail, which may be precisely because they did not have the means by which to articulate a feminist perspective. Also, as mentioned previously, Walkerdine (2001, p.95) points out that accepting notionally that we live in an equal society 'removes the entitlement to feel encumbered by it'. I am suggesting that my research group

members did feel encumbered by inequality but did not have the means to articulate their dissatisfaction.

The arguments presented here are that media images are influential and negative and that female audiences are seduced by these images. These arguments also suggest that feminism and feminist principles are used by advertising campaigns to work ideologically on women, thus persuading them to disregard any agentic notions of challenging stereotypes. This suggests that the media is incredibly powerful and able to influence women and young girls, but it is not deemed to be influential by academics who see through the strategies. This is unlikely. Whilst the power and influence of the media should not be underestimated, the channels of articulation that young women set up with each other are also of great value. I would like to explore whether there is a potential amongst young women to develop feminist ideas, or indeed whether young women already practice a contemporary form of feminism. I have begun to identify a form of communality amongst young women, and their understanding of each other's lives certainly suggests to me an unharnessed collectivism.

I would like to widen the argument a little here to consider the idea of new femininities and how academic work has addressed the issues facing young women in what is often regarded as a highly sexualised culture. If we accept that temporality, audience agency and power relations form the beginnings of a newer (less reductive) understanding of young female audiences, then it is useful to consider how new femininities are brought about through this understanding.

## **New Femininities**

Turning to Harvey and Gill's (2011) highly relevant and insightful work on the emergence of a new feminine subject, which they term 'the sexual entrepreneur' (2011, p.52), the work is in some ways a

response to the increasing sexualisation of young women set amongst a rapid rise in consumerism and neoliberalism, and their argument is that feminists are polarised around the significance of these new femininities. Traditional feminists (this term refers to second-wave feminists) have viewed the contemporary sexualisation of culture and the kinds of sexualities that have emerged for women as a repetition in a new guise of old sexist stereotypes rising from patriarchal notions of gender. More contemporary feminist work (this term refers to third-wave or postmodern feminism) has focused on the potential for women to explore female sexuality and on notions of pleasure and empowerment. Harvey and Gill offer an account that does not rely on the polarisation of feminist academics, and therefore their account of new femininities attempts to move beyond the boundaries set by these two polar positions. This is useful for my own work, as it appears to a similar trajectory whereby the process of media text consumption is fluid, dynamic and temporal. Therefore, consumption is not fixed in either negative or positive stereotypes of empowered or objectified women responding to a hyper-sexualised culture.

In this context, Harvey and Gill consider the sexualisation of culture and its relationship with power. They reject the ‘view of modern power as overwhelming domination, and highlight instead the ways in which power works “in and through subjects”’ (2011, p.55). In this way the sexualisation of culture discussed here and in other chapters is not solely a product of patriarchy but a result of a number of changes. Specifically they suggest ‘the intensified consumerism of fast capitalism – which created space for a new hybrid subject who was both invited – and incited (as we shall show below) – into being’ (2011, p.56). This is an interesting idea and one that contributes to the debate around the impact of neoliberalism and the political economy on new femininities, as discussed in Chapter 3, in relation to the political economy around female television presenters. What it also suggests is that there is space for the development of new femininities through ‘sexual entrepreneurship’ (2011, p.57):

This modern, post-feminist subject, we contend, is incited to be compulsorily sexy and always “up for it,” and is interpolated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling (as well as a budget capable of stretching to a wardrobe full of sexy outfits and drawers stuffed with sex toys). Beauty, desirability and sexual performance(s) constitute her on-going projects and she is exhorted to lead a “spiced up” sex life, whose limits – not least heterosexuality and monogamy – are tightly policed, even as they are effaced or disavowed through discourses of playfulness and experimentation (2011, p.56).

Harvey and Gill use the television programme *The Sex Inspectors* as their case study and identify how it is able to call up or bring about the existence of the sexual entrepreneur through the discourse of an apparently self-chosen self-empowerment. They comment: ‘We also explore how it brings into being not simply different bodily practices and sexual performances, but also a “made over” sexual subjectivity for women’ (2011, p.57). This work encapsulates two relevant ideas about femininities and media consumption relevant to my own work. The first is that female subjectivities are brought about or called up through the discourse of television, which can be considered in my analysis of young girls watching female television presenters. The second is that the idea of choice and self-empowerment is a persuasive and highly effective ideological tool. Harvey and Gill describe how the post-feminist subject is encouraged to ‘reskill’ in terms of maintaining ‘beauty, desirability and sexual performance’. This subjectivity is presented as a series of choices and in turn draws on notions of freedom and empowerment.

I was able to exploit my proximity to young girls to explore ideas about what it means to be a teenage girl in the 21st century, before I began my focus group work. Our discussions, sometimes led by me, sometimes directed by the girls, included their thoughts about marriage and careers. These discussions revealed surprisingly candid ideas about the kinds of choices the girls thought were open to them. Whilst some girls were focused on traditional routes to university and jobs, others were looking for “easier” routes such as ‘marry some rich guy, then get divorced and live off the settlement’. This was a very serious suggestion by a 17-year-old girl, as she saw academic achievement as a less worthwhile path and genuinely believed in her proposition as a career choice. This offers a new perspective on young women’s engagement with notions of empowered women

in the workplace. The fieldwork did reveal a surprising lack of belief in the idea of equality and the range of employment opportunities available for women. Whilst a number of the girls were planning to go on to university, they were not overly optimistic about their chances of success in the workplace, and some also seemed pessimistically aware of the gender pay gap. To some extent, then, the comment by one of the girls that she would ‘marry a rich guy’ was not as superficial and narcissistic as it appeared at first glance. Since completing this research project, I have become increasingly aware of the sense of difficulty girls feel about becoming adults. The media images of “successful women” surrounding them are breathtakingly ambitious and are mostly unattainable because of their artificiality. Young girls (and women) are addressed through media texts as confident, aspiring and highly motivated, and should a girl feel anything other than confident, then the media provides a host of solutions to her problem: lose weight, have a makeover, buy new clothes and learn how to be more “attractive.” In this sense, then, the comment ‘marry a rich guy’ can be understood as the least difficult alternative, although it does however strike a chord reminiscent of a character in a Jane Austen novel or a stereotypical housewife in the 1950s. Nonetheless, whilst the women in these cases are motivated by a lack of opportunity, the girls in the research group “appear” to have nothing but opportunity.

I discovered from my background research (informal conversations and the initial questionnaire) that the idea of being a famous television presenter is a very attractive prospect for some girls, as it appears to be effortless in the execution of the role and relatively easy to achieve. According to the respondents, becoming a presenter, however, depends on whether “they” (this meant the agents or television production companies) think you are “pretty enough” to do the job. The idea that stereotypical representations of femininity are a significant factor for a presenter was commonly acknowledged by my research group. Their acknowledgement did not, as I had previously imagined, generate feelings of envy and wistfulness, though – a response which would concur with ideas that



girls are easily manipulated by media images. The common assumptions by the girls really suggested for me that they had a knowingness or understanding that a feminine look was achieved through being “worked on” and was a necessary response to the political and economic factors of the industry. Nevertheless, despite their “knowingness,” these girls appeared to be very much invested in the images of female television presenters. They would have long conversations about the presenters, using information from celebrity magazines as a cornerstone for their discussions. It became apparent to me that they discussed celebrity presenters in some way as “friends”; they were able to speculate on how they thought these women should deal with their careers and personal lives. The imagined and real relationships these teenagers formed appeared to matter to them, and it is this “mattering” that is still of real interest for me.

The idea that audiences are passive and uncritical of the ideas that are generated in popular media texts is, on inspection, a hugely simplistic and outdated one. However, I suggest that this notion of the passive audience still resonates within dominant ideologies. Journalists working for popular newspapers, for example, are continuously writing articles that invoke moral panic about the effects of media texts. Academics use the potential of media images as a focus for their research. The popular perception that the media causes harm is a seductive one, as it provides an answer to some otherwise complex questions about power and responsibility on the part of the media. Toby Miller discovered a survey by Britain’s Association of Teachers and Lecturers, which surveyed 800 members in 2009. He noted their survey findings:

[In total] 66 per cent said that *Big Brother* (2000) was the programme that caused most poor behaviour amongst pupils, closely followed by *Little Britain* (2003) at 61 per cent and *EastEnders* at 43 per cent. Staff say these programmes led to general rudeness such as answering back, mimicking, using retorts and TV catchphrases (mentioned by 88 per cent) and swearing or using inappropriate language (mentioned by 82 per cent) (Miller, 2010, p.9).

The simplicity of the reasoning is seductive, and my own very early assumptions about teenage girls relied heavily on the idea that they are passive and uncritical of the images created by female

presenters. Recent publications (discussed in this work) by established feminist academics raise concerns about the sexualisation of young women and the effects and responsibility of the media. Academics within cultural studies have therefore constantly wrestled with ideas about the ideological influence of the text and how to define the audience. Gill reflects on this dilemma, and her comments are pertinent to my understanding of this question:

I have considerable sympathy with this critique – particularly the critique of social psychological “effects” research with its hypodermic understandings of cultural influence. There is clearly no simple one-to-one relationship between viewing images of very thin models and developing anorexia. But in rejecting this simplistic hypothesis, is it necessary to abandon the terrain of “culture” altogether (2008, p.434)?

My experiences of girls’ conversations suggest that they are very engaged by media images of women, and therefore by default they take on board some of the messages and values present in the text. The “dangerous effects” of celebrity are the focus of a research project initiated by Heather Mendick, Laura Harvey and Kim Allen, whose website CelebYouth.org outlines their research initiatives:

There are growing concerns in the UK that celebrity is impacting negatively on young people’s aspirations. Politicians and teacher unions have spoken out on the “dangerous effects” of celebrity, expressing fears that young people just want fame (as footballers’ wives or reality TV stars) rather than achievement based on hard work and skill. This study builds on recent research suggesting that celebrity informs young people’s educational and career aspirations in complex ways. It will explore how accounts of aspiration within celebrity (e.g. stories of success, talent and self-realisation) shape young people’s imagined futures ([www.CelebYouth.org](http://www.CelebYouth.org)).

Clearly the notion that young people are negatively influenced by media images is a ubiquitous narrative and is driving contemporary research. The recent revival of feminism and feminist principles (for example *Object*, *The Orkney Feminist Network*, *Slutwalks*)<sup>56</sup> are attempts to engage

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.object.org.uk/> A site which challenges sex object culture (accessed July 2013).  
<https://twitter.com/OrkFemNet> Orkney feminists’ Twitter group for feminist discussion (assessed July 2013).

women in feminist dialogues. These initiatives are also signs of the resurgence of feminism as an ideological tool for identifying and discussing the impact of negative media images. The findings of the CelebYouth research project (begun in 2012 and running until 2014) will make for interesting debate and be of great relevance for future research. I have recently accepted an invitation to attend one of their workshops as a further education lecturer, to discuss young people's aspirations and celebrity, and I look forward to this opportunity.

Reflecting on how teenage girls talk about television presenters gave me the opportunity to compare their comments with contemporary narratives around feminism and post-feminism. Their complex responses to sexualised images of the presenters suggest that they have a pragmatic view of how women should behave. If, for example, celebrity and television presenter Katie Price presents a sexualised image to appeal to male audiences but has the intention of setting up her own business with her earnings, then this course of action is acceptable. Other presenters use their sexualised images differently and the focus group is vocal about these differences. If a presenter is displaying a highly sexualised persona and her actions appear to the focus group to be purely for male attention, then the group is unforgiving of her actions. This resonates with Janice Radway's (1984) idea of resistance, where she suggests that those readers taking part in her research are actively resisting the ideological assumptions present in the text and are using the act of reading romance to fulfil their unmet needs. This is pertinent to understanding the response of these girls, as they may be providing their own understanding of female behaviour based on their resistant ideas to patriarchy. However, without quite being able to identify why, I felt this was too simple an account – there are problems with the academic researcher producing an overoptimistic account of audience studies that declares a positive, empowering and resistant reading of media texts.

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<http://slutmeansspeakup.org.uk/> A campaign to demand protection from rape (accessed July 2013).

In her 1994 study of female responses to Hollywood stars of the 1930s and 1940s, Jackie Stacey allows both psychoanalytic theory and ethnographic responses to inform each other. Stacey suggests that the reconstruction of the past through cinema-going creates a form of nostalgia that has particular significance for women. She also suggests that femininity is also a cultural product, and in a patriarchal society it becomes an 'unattainable image of desirability'. It is women's inability and struggle to come to terms with the difference between their own self-image and the unattainable image that creates a sense of loss. She suggests that physical attractiveness is seen as the embodiment of femininity and youthfulness.

Stacey found that the women in her research group were able to see retrospectively how the Hollywood star was an unattainable image, because the image was constructed by the technical skills of make-up, lighting, lenses, etc. Stacey suggests that this recognition may contribute to the sense of loss experienced by the respondents for the illusory and powerful effect of Hollywood. She expands this sense of loss to incorporate the 'impossibility of femininity', whereby film stars represent a 'fantasy self never realised' (in Brooker and Jermyn, 2003, p.152).

Stacey's suggestions resonate in some way with my own research. Teenage girls are acutely aware of the way images of women are "produced" for television and clearly understand that these women are "worked on" through make-up, hair colour, stylists, lighting, etc. to produce desirable images of femininity for audiences. However, this awareness is often forgotten when they negatively compare women on television with themselves, and perhaps at this point they experience 'the impossibility of femininity'. Whilst I concur that young girls are influenced by images of femininity, they are also frustrated by these images and cynical about their validity. Their knowledge about the duplicitous nature of the media industry is quite detailed. For example, the technique of airbrushing out the

“flaws” of celebrity images is familiar to all young women, but this knowledge does not serve to reconcile them with their own self-image; rather, it serves to heighten the stakes for their own self-assessment and the assessment of other women. I suggest that this is an embodiment of Stacey’s “impossibility of femininity.” The frustration young girls experience is a balance of the ideological sway of media images set against a political economy, creating a dynamic and constantly shifting relationship for young girls. It is this notion of “impossibility” that may be addressed by emerging research projects such as CelebYouth discussed earlier.

McRobbie reflected on the ideological function of images of women and the pleasure these images produce for audiences:

Perhaps it not so effective after all, and at any rate, to dismiss so many millions of women as victims of ideology and therefore as on the other side of feminism was both simplistic and demeaning to those ordinary women. The emphasis on ideology, also presupposed some state of purity, knowledge and truth outside ideology, a space which in those early days feminism felt itself to occupy (McRobbie, 1996, p.174).

The rationale here is that if feminist academics had survived the supposed ideological attack present in magazines, then why was it assumed other women would become victims of ideology? This is also the problem I encountered with my own early assumptions about my focus group of teenage girls. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, I had imagined that the group were simply unfamiliar with feminist principles and therefore I would be able to “show them the way” forward. I had perceived that the girls’ behaviour was due to their lack of awareness of issues concerning, for example, equality and empowerment. This was a serious underestimation of the ways in which the girls understand and read media texts. I had not understood the ways that they engage with media images and negotiate the terrain of identity, subjectivity and the media.

## **The post-feminist debate and new femininities**

This research set out to investigate the influence of contemporary media images of women on young girls. Specifically, I chose to focus on female television presenters, as they appeared to produce the most interesting responses from the teenage girls I observed. These women are famous but they are not considered celebrities in the truer sense of the word; the women are discussed by the girls as if they are friends, and their relationships with these women are complex and valuable. This present work is a response and contribution to scholarly (and media) debates about the way girls appear to succumb to hyper-sexualised images of femininity, in order to inform their own sense of identity. It is also a response to the notion that young girls are lacking in feminist principles and agency, considering these ideas outdated and redundant within a neoliberal landscape that promotes individualism, choice and self-improvement as models for success. The post-feminist debate amongst academics suggests that young women are not engaging with the ideas of first- and second-wave feminism, which may be because the legacy of these movements is not being articulated in any arena. As a response to this suggestion, the Astell Project <sup>57</sup> calls for Women and Gender Studies to be introduced into the national curriculum by 2015. The imperative here is that ‘these aims are to be achieved by acting as a resource bank and agitating for gender education so that legal and governmental commitments to equality, diversity and the provision of a safe environment are met’, which addresses the issue of the ways in which young women appear to be disconnected from feminist ideas in a post-feminist environment.

The initiative to introduce into the national curriculum narratives that address issues of gender, inequality and power is symptomatic of the way in which feminism is being discussed across a number of discourses. My perception is that newspaper and magazine articles are introducing feminism as a contemporary issue through regular editorials and articles, which may be a response

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<sup>57</sup> <http://theastellproject.wordpress.com/about-2/> (accessed May 2013).

to new enterprises. To name a few initiatives: the magazine *Spare Rib* is to be relaunched as the *Feminist Times*; *The London Student Feminist Network*; *The Twitter Youth Feminist Army* initiated by school girls; the *Generation F* initiative and the recent news coverage of Julie Bentley, the new head of the Girl Guides, and her rebranding of the Guides as ‘the ultimate feminist organisation’.<sup>58</sup> These all indicate a renewed interest in feminist ideas.

The theme of “new femininities” was addressed in 2007 in a series of seminars and an international symposium,<sup>59</sup> which explored the ways in which representations of femininity are changing. Gill and Arthurs, members of the organising committee, addressed ‘the paradoxes facing the contemporary analysts of gender’ (2006, p.443) and identified the complex and conflicting ways in which women are addressed. The authors suggest that the perception is that women and girls are succeeding in education and employment, which is evidenced by dialogues of success in media and political discourses. However, there is still an inequality pay gap, as men still dominate senior positions in employment, pornography has become incorporated and normalised into mainstream culture, sex trafficking is a significant problem and the sexualisation of women in media texts is ubiquitous. Given this description, it is perhaps not surprising to see feminist ideas being taken up by organisations such as those outlined above. What is of interest, then, is how these ideas have been adapted by young women and whether this leads to the emergence of “new femininities”?

Gill (2007) has written extensively on post-feminism and new femininities and considered how and whether media texts are able to offer a feminist sensibility. She describes three ways in which post-feminism has been understood and then offers a fourth herself. She identifies these as an

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<sup>58</sup> Barnett, E., 2012, Girl Guides new chief: we are the ultimate feminist organisation, *The Telegraph* online available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/9680030/Girl-Guides-new-chief-we-are-the-ultimate-feminist-organisation.html> (accessed March 2013)

<sup>59</sup> New Femininities funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, January 2004 -January 2007

epistemological shift, a historical transformation, a backlash against feminism and finally that post-feminism is best understood as a sensibility.

To expand on these points, post-feminism as an epistemological shift distinguishes itself from second-wave feminism and is closely coupled to post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Briefly, post-modernism is understood to refer to postmodernity, a new phase in Western capitalism often used in academic cultural studies and also referred to as “late capitalism” (Giddens, 1991). This is critiqued through postmodern aesthetics such as television, film, music, fashion, etc., where there is an ironic acknowledgement of and scepticism toward existing or previous cultural, intellectual, political and everyday life. Post-structuralism can be understood as a partial rejection of structuralism and its tendency to view reality in terms of systematic sets of binary oppositions, thus moving structuralism towards a plurality of meanings. Post-structuralism is best exemplified in the work of Foucault, Lacan and Althusser. Post-colonialism, in contrast, is mostly political and often anti-Western. It studies the impact of Western colonialism and the emerging independence of nations and national identity.

The notion of an epistemological shift for feminism therefore intersects with ‘anti-foundationalist movements’ (Giddens, 1991, p.250) but also engages with existing forms of feminism and, like the movements described earlier, signals a change or shift in emphasis. Post-feminism is a form of feminism not coded by white Western women but which allows for Third World and black feminists to challenge normalised cultural politics. Furthermore, the focus for post-feminism is not on equality but difference, where the tolerance and inclusion of other movements are taken into account. Where second-wave feminists challenged the oppressiveness of patriarchy, post-feminism has a ‘more pluralistic conception of the application of feminism’ (1991, p.250). The criticism of



second-wave feminism has been the result of the predominance of white Western middle-class women creating policies at the expense of working-class, black and non-Anglo-American feminists.

Secondly, post-feminism is a historical shift following on from second-wave feminism, though it does have a different set of debates which may not marry with those second-wave feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. The point of dissent appears to be within the post-feminist critiquing of contemporary cultural texts such as, for example, the television show *Ally McBeal*. Moseley and Read (2002, cited in Gill, 2007, p. 251) argue that the main character, Ally, is a post-feminist heroine and that second-wave criticisms of this and similar texts are due mainly to the rigidity of second-wave feminist politics which focus on the expectation that cultural texts have radical potential and that contemporary texts are lacking such an initiative. This directly contradicts McRobbie's assessment of texts such as *Bridget Jones* discussed earlier, and in this way it suggests the differences between the two different stages of feminism.

Put simply, post-feminism, according to Joanne Hollows (in Gill, 2007, p.251), 'represents a new kind of feminism for a new context of debate... as dynamic, negotiated and in the process of on-going transformation'. Gill reflects here that although this critique of feminism is an important one, she is doubtful about the usefulness of a progressive reading of highly sexualised images of female singers such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, for example. Also, there is a danger in post-feminism's ultimate flexibility whereby every cultural text is read progressively. I agree with Gill's perspective here, as it resonates with my own research. My attempts to investigate teenage girls' relationships with 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminism inevitably led me to representations of women in media texts. An ultimately progressive reading of every representation of sexuality, femininity and cultural politics through the ethnographic study of teenage girls would, I feel, be a critique lacking sufficient depth and understanding of how young women are addressed by and respond to media texts.

Thirdly, the post-feminist backlash began, according to Gill, in the 1980s and 1990s, when white men were personified as victims. The notion of a crisis in masculinity was identified (where men were unable to reconcile new ideas about masculinity and comfortably marry them with old established ideas) and the battle for gender equality was generally agreed in media texts to have been won. Gill suggests that feminism began to take on a new persona and was integrated within the discourse of political correctness, while representations within the media of political correctness showed it as an unyielding form of tyranny. Men were identified as the victims of this tyranny and feminism began to look as though it was at the root of unhappiness for women. Gill refers to Imelda Whelan's notion of retro-sexism and suggests that this was part of this backlash. Whelan uses the idea of the 'new lad' as an example of a 'nostalgic revival of old patriarchy' (in Gill, 2007, p.253). Here she suggests "the new lad" revives – 'albeit ironically – the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles'. Gill also refers to Judith Williamson's argument that contemporary sexism is just 'sexism with an alibi' (2007, p.254). Williamson uses advertising as an example. She suggests that campaigns are often set within the 1960s and '70s context of gender relations and that the campaigns refer to the past with a "knowingness" and an assumption that we all are a lot wiser. Yet, she insists that this address is simply a reincarnation of traditional sexism, albeit this time with a complicit audience.

Whilst Gill accepts these two examples of media sexism (Whelan and Williamson), she is not convinced that this is the whole story, as young women are addressed as 'knowing, active, heterosexually-desiring sexual subjects' (2007, p. 255) without recourse to nostalgic reinventions of femininity. Therefore, this landscape for young women is not so much a backlash but a new response to feminism. This new address to women, according to Gill, couples with neoliberalism, which she refers to as post-feminist sensibility. Again, I would have to agree with Gill on this point.

Many young women are unaware of second-wave feminism or indeed the implications of “sexist” representations of gender relations. I have found in my research that young women generally have a genuine lack of knowledge and understanding of feminist history, and so I feel this address to young women is not ironic and “knowing;” rather, as Gill suggests, it positions them as ‘desiring sexual subjects’.

For Gill, a post-feminist sensibility should be set against contemporary representations of gender in media texts in an attempt to discover how gender works to create meaning for audiences. Primarily, she emphasises the sexualisation of culture and a shift from female objectification to subjectification. The shift to subjectification can be found in representations of gender across contemporary media, and she identifies the pressure to self-monitor our own appearance according to strict consumer guidelines, through magazines and television makeover shows, and then represent this self-surveillance as free choice, individualism and empowerment. This sexualisation can be seen through the preoccupation with ‘a sexy body’ (2007, p.255), which for some women is the ultimate goal. In fact, Gill suggests that it is this quest and not motherhood that is now central to femininity. This is an interesting assessment and corresponds with Rowe Karlyn’s ideas (discussed earlier) that older women in film and television are represented negatively, usually as manipulative and untrustworthy. Young girls therefore do not always experience positive representations of age but are encouraged to identify with “sexy” bodies. To achieve the perfect body, women must monitor themselves to ensure they meet the exacting standards of media representations of women. This self-surveillance, which monitors weight, hair, skin, dress, career, domestic life, financial health, etc., is a constant in women’s lives; however, it is usually passed off by media texts in what Gill refers to as ‘an extraordinary ideological sleight of hand, which must nevertheless be understood as “fun” or “pampering” or “self-indulgence” and must never be disclosed’ (2007, p.262). The focus group responses to media texts that use the narratives of “fun”

or “pampering” and “self-indulgence” are sometimes ambiguous and dismissive of the intent of the producers. The group discuss Eva Longoria and her appearance on a television advertisement for chocolate. The group are suspicious of the narratives offered:

**Danni** It’s, like, Eva Longoria! You can’t exactly see her staying in on Friday nights dying her hair, can you?

**Colette** And do you think she actually eats Magnum?

**Rachel** The tooth mark that’s in it – she didn’t bite it! (Accusatory).

**All** She didn’t bite it. (Emphatic).

**Colette** You know when she did that Sensations advert – you know when she eats them, she spat them back out – she won’t actually eat them! (Conclusively).

**Sophie** That’s pathetic! (Scornful).

The group appear offended by the pretence and also that producers of the text would expect them to accept Longoria’s performance. However, the group also displayed ambivalence and confusion toward other women in the media. Their responses were “knowing” yet conflicted:

**Sophie** You do believe what you read. I know you shouldn’t, but you do because you’re quite consumed by it, so if that’s all the impression that you’re getting, then it does create a first...

**Lornette** ... even though I hate Chantelle I have to watch the show just to watch, just to see what she does...

This is in my experience a typical response by a teenage girl, in that the intent of the producers of the text is mostly clear to them and yet somehow they are intrigued almost against their better

judgement. To some extent the sheer volume of media images and ideas that young women are faced with is exhausting and will eventually become subliminal. The ways that girls incorporate these ideas into their own subjectivity is varied and depends on their ability to defend themselves on any given occasion. In my assessment, I do see their responses as defences against some unpalatable/impossible representations of femininity, albeit they do not have a set of established guidelines to support them accordingly. I have observed that age and experience are influencing factors, too, as the group discuss older female presenters differently to younger women (and differently to older male presenters), thus suggesting that these women are more “entitled” to behave in contradictory ways. To use Fern Britton as an example, the group were not critical of Britton’s decision to lie about how she lost weight. Britton had implied her weight loss was due to healthy eating and exercise, when in fact she had opted for gastric band surgery. The group understood that the lie was unfortunate, but they nevertheless maintained that this was Britton’s “choice”, which contrasts sharply with the behaviour of younger women in the media spotlight. The idea that young women are inventing feminism on their own terms, as discussed by Rowe Karlyn, is an encouraging concept, although without the prop of the first and second waves of feminism to interpret and adapt, this may be too nebulous a movement to be successful. That there is an initiative to reintroduce gender studies into compulsory education may become a supportive measure for young people. This initiative is echoed in the resurgence of feminist blogs and social media discussed throughout this work.

Returning to Gill’s assessment of a post-feminist landscape, she suggests that contemporary representations focus on women as active subjects who choose to present themselves as sexualised and liberated. This image of women focuses on sexual power and the acknowledgement thereof. Gill recognises this acknowledgement of sexual power as central to understanding a post-feminist sensibility, shifting power from a ‘male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze’ (2007,

p.258). Gill argues further that this is a deeper form of exploitation than objectification, as power is not imposed from outside but is part of our subjectivity. This “self-policing”, I suggest, is part of the ambiguity felt by young girls, as discussed earlier, who are drawn to watching women in the media yet cannot articulate why this is so. This is most evident when they check and assess female presenters, and their responses to these women range between affection, nostalgia and rejection, which is part of the playing out of a post-feminist sensibility.

Gill accepts that in a post-feminist climate, feminist ideas are now part of rather than outside of popular culture. However, she argues that this does not suggest that media texts are unproblematically feminist; instead, they seek to attack feminist ideas. Gill refers to Angela McRobbie’s (2004) notion here of the “double entanglement” of neoliberal values in relation to gender sexuality and family life and a feminism that is at once part of common sense, yet also feared, hated and fiercely repudiated’ (in Gill, 2007, p.268). A post-feminist sensibility therefore takes a liberal feminist perspective as common sense, but it then sees feminists as outmoded, not really expressing what women want anymore. This does seem to reflect my experience of teenage girls, who would take issue with the term “feminism,” asking what it means. For these girls the term is old-fashioned and suggests aggressive women with no real agenda apart from challenging masculinity. This has certain consequences, in that young women have few reference points that explain or support any ideas of discomfort they may have with hyper-sexualised media images. A post-feminist sensibility also makes individuals out of potential collectivists by reframing any debate on subjectivity to focus on individualism and body image.

To expand this discussion on feminism and post-feminism briefly, Amanda Lotz (2007, p.71), suggests we currently exist in a period of *intermezzo*. This, she envisages, is a new era in feminism and must be explained as coming after second-wave feminism. Furthermore, Lotz calls for a

language for feminists to negotiate the *intermezzo*, suggesting that this language should recognise the achievements of second-wave feminism whilst also noting its failures. The language would embrace contemporary representations of feminism instead of rebuking third-wave and post-feminists for their failure to engage with feminist histories. Lotz suggests this would be a way forward for feminism and would recognise difference rather than focus on commonality. I suggest that her description of the need for a new language is echoed by other scholars, and it is this new re-framing of the debates on feminism and the construction of subjectivity that are driving the discussion.

There does, however, appear to be some oppositional ideas amongst feminists around the nature of post-feminist media texts, some of which reflect on whether it is possible to make a progressive critique of postmodern aesthetics. Academics such as McRobbie and Gill are sceptical about a postmodern perspective where too many possibilities and what Gill terms post-feminism's 'ultimate flexibility' render a text empty of any meaningful content. They are also mindful of a feminist backlash where the aims and strategies of second-wave feminism are discarded in favour of a focus on individualism. Nonetheless, a second-wave approach, which does not attempt to engage with contemporary media texts but treats them suspiciously as offering an ideological "sleight of hand," misses an opportunity to bridge the divide between traditional and contemporary feminist perspectives. That said, all the academics discussed herein recognise the need for a new language or approach to understanding how 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture engages young women. What I am beginning to understand about young women and their responses to media texts and to representations of feminism in any form is that it is not always useful to make conjectures using young girls as a unified category. By this I mean that although the majority of girls are subjected to the same or similar media images and are becoming aware of feminist ideas, as evidenced through the new initiatives discussed here, they do not all respond in the same way. Whatever form "new

femininities” or a new feminist language takes on, it will have to accommodate difference in terms of social class, race, ethnicity and family, as these are particularly defining factors.

The impetus for this research was academic curiosity about how young girls negotiate their teenage years amongst the overwhelming onslaught of media images addressing women and girls. The significant increase in advice from media “experts” on lifestyle choices, fashion, careers, relationships and emotional wellbeing makes it virtually impossible for audiences to remain unscathed. These media texts are often used by young girls as a focus for their discussions, and these are usually pleasurable and collective experiences. Similarly, girls use conversations about female television presenters as a way of communicating with their peers and exploring ideas of femininity while scoping out the female landscape in preparation for their own adult lives. The focus group findings suggest that girls use female presenters as a barometer for the difficulties they may encounter themselves, which is completely contrary to my initial assessment of how girls engage with media images, as I had assumed that they were using these women as aspirational role models. This also contradicts commonly held concerns amongst some feminist scholars that girls are susceptible to ideological duping and are seduced by unattainable and idealised images of women. The focus group members showed that they are knowledgeable about and cognisant with how the media addresses women. They are aware that many of the images that they see are manipulated either by in-print airbrushing or by editing film and television sequences. Their responses to these images and to other images of women in the media are more complex than simply being seduced by them – the girls appear to be aware of the way that women are offered up as role models in some media texts, and also that they are held up for derision by others. They therefore demonstrate an awareness that women in the media are in a precarious position, as at any moment they can be the subject of either praise or disparagement. This level of consciousness amongst the group members suggests that they use conversations about female television presenters



to construct a cautionary narrative for their own lives. The women are representational and not, as I had assumed, aspirational role models.

The group members are sceptical of notions of gender equality in the workplace and are able to articulate cynicism towards their future that suggests disillusionment prior to any actual experiences of any significant employment. This scepticism may stem from an underlying sensibility about the restrictive spaces occupied by women in the media, and this inequality may translate into their own lived experience. However, the group members show equal measures of cynicism and optimism around some of the women, inasmuch as they praise those whom they see as hard-working and self-sufficient, and in this way they show that they are cognisant with neoliberal values. They disparage those women who, in their opinion, are insincere, and in this way they demonstrate anxiety and unease around women who are a source of embarrassment. This sense of unease suggests that the group members are disquieted by the ways women are directed to pursue a post-feminist and neoliberal lifestyle.

The pleasure that the group experienced from their conversations about female presenters was apparent and made for lively and enthusiastic group sessions. For example, their complete absorption in the dramatic narrative of Katie Price, and their admiration for her business acumen, suggests a willingness by the group to invest in the possibility that women can make their own business decisions and be empowered. Also, the disparagement and anxiety exhibited toward Holly Willoughby, Claudia Winkleman and Charlotte Church suggest the danger that the girls sense from being out of place in a masculine environment. The group is also unwilling to accept that Willoughby, Winkleman and Church have any professionalism or capability, which is, I suggest, due to their unease with these women for behaving in a manner that draws negative male attention, thus leaving the group members fearful of the consequences of this kind of behaviour exhibited by these women.

The level of anxiety demonstrated by the group became clear once I had transcribed and studied the sessions and had perceived their nervousness, their accusatory manner and their anger at the women whose behaviour was not sanctioned as authentic by the group. This suggests the high level of significance these women have for the group members so that, whilst the conversations between the girls appear conversational and innocuous, on closer inspection these women are used as a way of acting out anxieties about their own future lives.

I have identified that female presenters are the “housekeepers” of the shows they present, which suggests that the feminised texts that these women tend to appear in contribute to stereotypical notions of femininity and allow them to act out typically domestic rituals such as mediating conversations between guests, orchestrating the structure and content of the show (although they are not the creators of the content) and making sure that the audience is kept engaged and entertained. This stereotyping through the tropes of domesticity contributes to the ways in which the focus group members understand how women are represented unequally in the media. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the focus group members differentiate between male and female television presenters. The group identifies male presenters as possessing more authority and gravitas, suggesting that these men are able to move freely around media texts and institutions, uninhibited by disparagement. The group members particularly object to female presenters (whom they have praised for other more feminine attributes) attempting to be just as unrestricted and bold in the range of programmes they present.

Female presenters also operate as proxy celebrities, a notion which provides a conduit for girls to experience celebrity through “ordinary” eyes and allows them to invest in female presenters as “friends”, which is important to the girls – if they are to use these women as barometers of a female experience, then they must be able to identify with them on some level. The girls are able to identify that these women have either imperfections in their physical appearance or character flaws, which

makes them more ordinary and also more accessible. Affection for these women transpires when the focus group members are able to agree that the woman in question is authentic and understands her place within the media landscape. What is noticeable is that older female presenters are given more leeway and respect because of their age, which suggests that these older women are in a less precarious position, are more likely to be able to defend themselves within a male-dominated social structure and therefore can offer young girls reassurance rather than unease. This attitude toward older women in some ways contradicts and colludes with the recent debates about the representation of these women in media texts. Rowe Karlyn (2013) has articulated how older women are seen as ‘unrepentant mothers’ or as ‘aberrant’ – they are present on screen but largely represented as untrustworthy and manipulative. Rowe Karlyn suggests that there are no sympathetic maternal figures for girls, and instead the role is taken up by the “feminist man” within media texts who is able to articulate feminist ideas. Karlyn describes the “feminist man” as the male character who befriends the female protagonist and offers sympathy and advice using a feminist discourse and therefore further estranging the older female in the narrative. The research group may not have many maternal media figures in other media texts; however, older female presenters are indeed visible and do inhabit the domestic sphere within their presenter role. This could be a source of comfort for girls on two levels – as a sympathetic maternal figure and as a survivor of a male-dominated media environment.

What became clear in this research is that female media figures are used as commodities within media texts and are targeted at female audiences as examples of commodified femininity. Feminist political economist Riordan (2002) makes the point that unlike other political economists, feminists in this field use as a starting point the idea that all texts have a male bias and that women working within the media and audiences are positioned within and respond to a set of patriarchal discourses. The female presenters in this research are confined by restrictive practices within the media industry because, in comparison to their male colleagues, they are not given the same opportunities

creatively or financially, which ultimately sets the boundaries for their media identity on screen and for the way they are understood by audiences. The resultant practice is that the women presenters are more likely to promote branded commodities for powerful corporate companies rather than create their own brand and autonomy. Male presenters, conversely, are more likely to establish their own working practices through self-owned production companies and are able to expect, on the whole, higher salaries for their labour and more creative freedom in their career choices. Female presenters are both criticised and admired for their ability to be financially successful by the research group, depending on the circumstances. In the media, female presenters are often criticised for their financial success, as discussed earlier.

My focus group members demonstrate an ability to maintain some critical distance from attempts to be sold products by marketing strategies that use idealised images of women as their enticement. This shows independent thought, critical judgement and media savvy, though they are not so clearly able to recognise the restrictive working practices required of women presenters. In this way, they are unaware of Riordan's assumption that women experience life within a set of patriarchal discourses, as they are particularly vigilant in their disparagement of women who, in their estimation, are too ambitious or confident in their abilities. This is apparent from the focus group members' displays of anxiety and unease at women who are out of place. Whilst the group disparages the women for being in the wrong place, its members do not examine why they do not give female television presenters the same authority or privilege that they give to male presenters. The final paragraphs of the transcripts are evidence that the group members are unaware of the high standards they set for female presenters. Their response to my summing up of their expectations for these women is surprise, shock and laughter at their demands. Whilst they are conversing about these women, I suggest that they are often unconsciously reiterating discriminatory and stereotypical notions of femininity from a patriarchal perspective.

The anxiety and unease they demonstrate, I suggest, is a symptom of their inability to reconcile patriarchal discourses with their own desires and sense of identity. A neoliberal landscape offers them in principle the opportunities for self-empowerment, equality, choice and self-improvement. The group members collectively acknowledge that pleasure can be achieved through the desire and ownership of commodities promoted through media channels. Fashion choices and lifestyles are offered to audiences through media figures such as television presenters, and the group critically assesses and reflects on the choices on offer. However, its members are also uneasy and sceptical about neoliberal opportunities. I suggest that this is because these are so closely linked to the hyper-sexualisation of women and, by implication, of themselves. The schism that takes place for these girls is one that cannot reconcile their mistrust of hyper-sexualised images of women and the promise of being free and self-empowered individuals in a neoliberal social structure. There is also an unconscious agreement to accept that women experience disadvantage because of their gender – the group was quite matter-of-fact about unequal pay structures based on gender. These young girls are unable to balance and reconcile their anxieties and unease with notions of self-empowerment, which causes confusion and disquiet; they are, after all, young girls. McRobbie (1996, 2004) identified tension amongst young women in the lack of fit between the way that they are addressed as free and privileged subjects and what they actually feel able to become. The focus group members demonstrate how this tension has become critical, by being pessimistically aware of how the sexualisation of women is embedded in contemporary culture. Gill (2007) suggests that unlike feminists before them, for young women today, an ideological and post-feminist sleight of hand has turned feminism back on itself and removed the opportunity for women to object to sexism, as to do so would be considered outdated, lacking in humour and simply incorrect. The young girls in the focus group are without the basic tools to articulate their disquiet. Reintroducing feminist ideas in a way that addresses this disquiet would begin to offer some agency to their anxiety and deepening sense of crisis.

Assessing this notion of crisis amongst young girls, a few years on from my initial focus group research, I sense that there is still an acceptance by young girls that women experience unequal treatment in the workplace. However, there is a more ready acceptance (by comparison to my focus group members) that teenage girls can object to sexism. This is not in my experience a widespread recognition, but the language of feminism is being reintroduced with some notable take up. This is possibly a consequence of the upsurge of feminist movements described earlier and may begin to have some bearing on the notion of crisis amongst young girls. The academic journal *Girlhood Studies* is a publication set up in 2008 to research and enquire into girl cultures. A recent special edition of this journal addressed the notion of girls in crisis and sought to redress and reframe the argument. The editors explained that:

Responding to Catherine Driscoll's assessment of the way girls are used to exemplify social crisis, the articles in this special issue redress the representation of girls as troubled vulnerable and failed subjects and in turn offer alternative ways of thinking that identify better targets of concern rather than hold girls individually responsible for the vulnerability they face and replicate the moral panic frameworks that target girls. Our authors point to the systematic forms of domination and political invisibility girls face in contemporary geopolitical structures (Rentschler and Mitchell, 2013).

This recent address seeks to investigate the origin of the crisis rather than the consequences exemplified by the behaviour of young girls, and it is an encouraging turn and one I would be interested in pursuing in further ethnographic research with young girls.

Couldry (2010, p.1) suggests that there is a '*crisis* of voice, across political, economic and cultural domains, that has been growing for at least three decades'. He puts neoliberalism at the root of this crisis and suggests that 're-connecting voice with the social' will serve to address this predicament. Again, this serves to support the call for agency amongst women and for them to be able to articulate the structure and meaning of the crisis that young women are experiencing. The pleasure involved in discussing female presenters for the group members is a form of resistance articulated

through affectionate disparagement and disparagement. The group members are able to acknowledge the intentions of media texts and reformulate these intentions for their own pleasure. There is no doubt that the group enjoy the spectacle of women in the media and are then also able to manipulate the intentions of the producers to extend their pleasure of the experience of watching, which is evidenced through the way they employ disparagement to comment on women's behaviour. This is both a personal and collective experience, and some feminists suggest that it is evidence of resistance to dominant patriarchal ideology. A feminist political economy questions whether this kind of resistance is adequate, and queries whether this constitutes agency. Steeves and Wasko (2002, p. 26) advocate 'a persuasive conceptual rationale for collaborative action' and suggest that the meeting of a political economy perspective and feminism creates a common ground on which to establish a strategy that includes capitalism and patriarchy and also issues of identity and sexuality. As I have suggested, teenage girls are familiar with the rhetoric of post-feminism but are lacking the means for "collaborative action" and therefore agency, and in this way I support Steeves and Wasko's call for 'a conceptual rationale'. Nonetheless, the foundations of this rationale need to originate from young women using their own post-feminist sensibility and their understanding of earlier feminist movements.

To this end, I would like to explore the conflict and sense of crisis I have identified herein and take up the notion of collaborative action. In a minor and grassroots way, I have introduced a discussion space for teenage girls at my institution that allows them to articulate their dissatisfaction or unease. This space is utilised by young women to explore their lived experiences and perhaps become familiar with feminist principles,, which may alleviate some of the inarticulation and hesitancy described in this research. I have initiated opportunities for girls to meet at lunchtimes to explore areas of interest and create debate. This forum is in its early stages, and although I have initially been the instigator for any sessions taking place, I expect to be able to become less instrumental as the project progresses. The first session was instigated by me and I invited a number of girls to

come with friends and with other girls talk about themselves. Nine girls came to the session, and after some initial shyness, as they did not all know each other (and I did not know some of them), they talked in some detail about life at college from their perspective. The feedback from some of the girls after the session was positive, inasmuch as they hadn't really appreciated how other girls felt and they were keen to organise another session. One girl suggested the name *Female Futures* for these sessions and for the group, which is their working title for the moment. The second session was smaller and the group decided to create flyers and make the meetings a more permanent event. I hope that their interest continues, as I did feel that they enjoyed the sense of communality – rarely are girls invited to collaborate with each other on a separatist agenda. Their conversations in these sessions ranged from lack of motivation, home life, loneliness, the pressures of deadlines and parent expectations. I hope to be able to introduce the idea of media images for their consideration for future discussions.

The nature of my future research would become apparent through the dynamics and structure of the group and hopefully provide further insight into teenage girls. To provide a snapshot of how the idea of feminism is understood by teenagers, I can provide two recent examples. I have used as a learning resource a T-shirt with the words '*This is what a feminist looks like*' from the *Fawcett Society* campaign. "Ellie," one of my female students, is 16. She saw the T-shirt and asked me what it was for. Her friend, sat beside her, said a feminist is someone who wants equality for women. "Ellie" replied in a horrified voice, 'What?! those kind of women – you can keep them!'. In this instance "Ellie" reiterated long-standing prejudices about women and feminism. The second instance occurred when I introduced an option from the A-level Film Studies specification called "*Empowering Women*." The unit requires some understanding of feminism from students in their second year of the course, which has been received with curiosity and interest from the mostly female students in the class (only two students are male), each of whom is either 17 or 18. The interest culminated in the girls in the class collaborating on a film production using an all-female



cast and crew. That they have enjoyed this unit is clear, and they have been given the space to be introduced to and question ideas about feminism. I felt that the group would be amenable to such a unit, as the time “feels right” for discussions about feminism. This may be a consequence of the popularity of feminist movements at present. However, the difference between these two stories is probably a good example of the range of responses to these movements.

To conclude this work, and to return to the research group, the methodology I used for this ethnographic research was successful, inasmuch as it enhanced my understanding of the subject. The limiting factor in my own research was the narrowness of inquiry. I did not use a specific set of criteria to identify my cohort and was led by the responses I received from my questionnaires and from the organic development of the research process. As discussed in Chapter 1, circumstances dictated the nature and structure of the research procedure, and my findings therefore were framed within this context. However, I do feel that the responses were genuine, elicited as naturally as is possible and do represent some common aspects of the experience of teenagers.

The focus group was relatively small and therefore offers a snapshot of a wider cohort. However, carrying out sessions with the same group allowed me to establish a working pattern and a better understanding of their preferences in terms of how the group members were able to respond as honestly as they could do so. Employing Wood’s text-in-action method became crucial to the findings, as it allowed me to access more than the actual words being spoken. It is particularly useful in a small group, as it is easier to distinguish the nuances of tone and mood and therefore is an added benefit for this research. I also discovered that it is easy to underestimate the ability of young girls. They are able to differentiate, sort through and cherry pick media images and messages and they are not ideological dupes. They are, however, constantly conflicted by the media images they experience and their own sense of identity, and they work hard at negotiating through this conflict.

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## Appendix

**Fig. 1** (p.68) Selina Scott appearing on *Breakfast Time*, the show first aired on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1983 <http://www.tv-ark.org.uk/news/bbcnews/breakfast.html>

**Fig 2** (p.70) Anne Diamond, formerly a BBC journalist, leaves the BBC to co present *TV-am* with Nick Owen. *Daily Mirror*, 2/6/1983 <http://80sactual.blogspot.com/2009/01/1983-tv-am-and-breakfast-time-breakfast.html>

**Fig. 3** (p. 96) Davina McCall appearing on the careers advice website icould, [www.icould.com](http://www.icould.com)

**Fig 4** (p. 109) TV Presenter Davina McCall arrives at the BAFTA Television Awards 2009 at the Royal Festival Hall on April 26, 2009 in London, England. (Photo by Tim Whitby/Getty Images  
(April 26, 2009 - Source: Tim Whitby/Getty Images Europe

**Fig. 5** (p. 114) Fearne Cotton and Holly Willoughby <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1315202/Holly-Willoughby-Fearne-Cotton-Inside-stuff.html>

**Fig. 6** (p.187) Holly Willoughby “I love my Curves” <http://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/defiant-holly-willoughby-insists-i-love-my-curves--and-ill-keep-showing-them-off-7240913.html>

## Appendix A (p.77)

I found that on BBC1, out of the 64 television programmes with presenters in vision that appeared that week, 8 were female, 43 were male and 13 programmes had both male and female. On BBC2, 38 presenters were male and 14 female and 15 programmes were co-hosted by a male and a female. On ITV1, 23 presenters were male, 5 were female and 17 were co-hosted by a male and a female. For C4, 22 presenters were male and 1 female and 3 were male and female. C5 featured 6 male presenters, 16 female and 6 male and female.

TV Scheduling from Saturday October 17<sup>th</sup> – Friday October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009-10-18 excluding news programmes. I decided not to include news presenters here as the focus group in my fieldwork would not usually identify news presenters as of interest to their conversations.

	No of programmes with presenters In vision	No of males only per week	No of females only per week	No by male and female team per week	Approximate Overall percentage screen time for male presenters per week	Approximate Overall percentage screen time for female presenters per week	Approximate Overall percentage screen time for male and female presenting teams per week
BBC1	64	43	8	13	67.18	12.31	20.31
BBC2	67	38	14	15	56.71	20.89	22.38
ITV1	45	23	5	17	51.11	11.11	37.77
C4	26	22	1	3	84.61	3.84	11.53
C5	28	6	16	6	21.42	57.14	21.42

### Questionnaire 1

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this research. This is a short questionnaire and will take around 10 minutes to complete. I am a research student with the University of Roehampton and I am interested in the responses of teenage girls (age 16-18) towards female television presenters. The results of this questionnaire will be included in my research, however you will remain anonymous. If you would be interested in taking part in further research I will shortly be showing some short clips of female presenters and this will be part of a discussion with you and some of your friends.

Amanda Wayling-Yates contact at:

Use the box below to name some female television presenters

Use the box below to name some television shows where you have seen these and other presenters.

Which of these shows do you regularly view?

**Which of these shows would you view occasionally?**

**What do you know about television presenters lives and where did you get this information?**

**Would you like to meet any of these presenters, if so why?**

**What kind of people do you think they are in real life?**

**Have you ever bought clothes or accessories because you have first seen them on a presenter?**

**What do you admire or dislike about female presenters?**

**Do you think their jobs are easy/quite difficult give reasons for your answer?**

**Do you think you could become a television presenter?**

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire, please tell me some details about you:**

**Age:**

**School/college course:**

**Intended career (if known)**

**How would you describe your ethnic origin:** White British   Black Caribbean   Black African   Chinese

Mixed Race   Bangladeshi   Indian   Pakistani   Asian   Other   White Irish   White other



## Questionnaire

### A study of teenage girls and female television presenters

I am a research student at the University of Roehampton. I am carrying out a study of teenage girls and their views on media images of female television presenters. I am inviting girls aged 16 -18 years to complete a short questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire are completely confidential and will be included in my final thesis with the permission of each respondent. The findings of the questionnaire will help me carry out small focus group interviews where girls will discuss media images of television presenters.

#### Question 1

Please look at the images of female television presenters at the back of this questionnaire and rank them in order of preference. 1 = most preferred 10 = least preferred

1	6
2	7
3	8
4	9
5	10

#### Question 2

In the space below write a short sentence which best describes why you ranked your number 1 presenter.

#### Question 3

In the space below write a short sentence which best describes why you ranked your number 10 presenter

#### Question 4

Are there any female presenters you can remember not included in the list? Write their names in the space below

#### Question 5

There are fourteen images of television presenters and you were asked to rank ten, what reasons can you give for not ranking four of the presenters?

#### Question 6

How difficult do you think it is to become a television presenter?

#### Question 7

Do you think you could become a television presenter? Give reasons for your answer

#### Question 8

Do you know how to go about starting a career as a television presenter?

What qualities do you think you need to become a successful television presenter?

### Question 10

If you are interested in taking part in the focus group sessions where we will watch clips of female presenters and talk about them, leave your name and contact details here:

Or you can contact me for more information on:



No. 1 Fern Britton



No. 2 Fearne Cotton



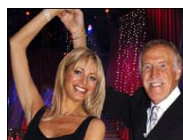
No. 3 Cat Deeley



No. 4 Davina McCall



No. 5 June Sarpong



No. 6 Tess Daley



No. 7 Claudia Winkleman



No. 8 Alexa Chung



No. 9 Holly Willoughby



No. 10 Kate Thornton



No. 11 Emma Griffiths



No.12 Sharon Osborne



No.13 Katie Price



No.14 Charlotte Church